



# EDGE

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# DEUS EX

## MANKIND DIVIDED

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THE ACTION RPG

### PREVIEWS

CALL OF DUTY:  
BLACK OPS III  
TONY HAWK'S  
PRO SKATER 5  
TRIAD WARS  
PROJECT ZERO V

**#281**

JULY 2015





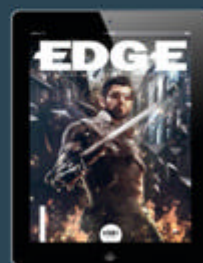
# The special powers needed to succeed in videogames

In this line of work, we're asked lots of questions, some of them repeatedly. Such as: what's it like to sit around playing videogames all day and call it a job? And: how do I get started in the videogame industry? Also: that guy who wanted to be able to talk to the monsters in *Doom* – have you checked in with him lately to see if he's all right?

Another common question: who are **Edge** readers? People ask this because it helps them decide whether or not they should be trying to talk to our audience through these pages, but breaking it down into tidy demographics isn't easy. Some **Edge** readers make videogames, some want to make videogames, some don't. Some readers are teenaged, some are in their 50s and 60s, some are in between. Most are men, some are women. Ultimately, all we can say is: our readers are into videogames. *Really* into videogames. So into videogames, in fact, that they remember bits from the **Edge** review of *Doom* from over 20 years ago.

We're all so consumed by our interests that it's almost impossible to remember when our lives didn't have videogames in them. Many of us, though, can remember the specific point at which that changed, and the tingling, breath-stopping realisation that nothing would ever be the same again. In this issue, Britsoft pioneers including David Braben, Jeff Minter and Archer Maclean share their own life-changing moments, identifying their first steps on the path to helping shape a nation's game industry.

What these people have in common is how much they put into their work. In the process of making **Edge**, we talk to videogame creators every day, and the ones who make the biggest impressions are those who care the most – the people who are *really* into videogames. In the creators of *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*, who share their motivations in our cover story, we found just such a group. For people looking to break into the game industry, their commitment should be an inspiration. Elsewhere this issue, the 2015 edition of *Get Into Games* provides some additional guidance.




Sample two free issues of our interactive iPad edition – search 'Edge' in the App Store



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# EDGE

## EDITORIAL

**Tony Mott** editor in chief **Nathan Brown** deputy editor  
**Ben Maxwell** writer **Matthew Clapham** production editor  
**Mark Wynne** senior art editor **Andrew Hind** art editor

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Ian Bogost, Brad Barrett, Roy Delaney, Sam Faulkner, Craig Grannell, Phil Iwaniuk, James Leach, David Meikleham, Angus Morrison, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole, Ashley Reed, Chris Schilling, Keith Stuart, Chris Thursten, Alex Wiltshire**

## ADVERTISING

**Kevin Stoddart** account manager (01225 687455 [kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com](mailto:kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com))

## CONTACT US

+44 (0)1225 442244 [edge@futurenet.com](mailto:edge@futurenet.com)

## SUBSCRIPTIONS

**UK reader order line and enquiries** 0844 8482852  
**Overseas reader order line and enquiries** +44 1604 250145  
**Online enquiries** [www.myfavouritemagazines.com](http://www.myfavouritemagazines.com)  
**Email** [edge@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk](mailto:edge@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk)

## MARKETING

**Laura Driffield** group marketing manager **Kristianne Stanton** marketing manager

## CIRCULATION

**Juliette Winyard** trade marketing manager +44 (0)7551 150984

## LICENSING

**Regina Erak** senior licensing and syndication manager ([regina.erak@futurenet.com](mailto:regina.erak@futurenet.com))  
Tel: +44 (0)1225 442244 Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275

## PRODUCTION & DISTRIBUTION

**Mark Constance** production manager **Nola Cokely** production controller  
**Nathan Drewett** ad production controller

## MANAGEMENT

**Daniel Dawkins** group editor in chief **Graham Dalzell** group art director  
**Declan Gough** head of content and marketing, film, music and games  
**Nial Ferguson** content and marketing director

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT (+44 (0)20 74294000). Overseas distribution by Seymour International.

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Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244  
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275



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**Chief executive** Zillah Byng-Maddick  
**Non-executive chairman** Peter Allen  
**Chief financial officer** Richard Hale  
Tel +44 (0)207 042 4000 (London)  
Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244 (Bath)



Print 14,351  
Digital 6,134

The ABC combined print, digital and digital publication circulation for Jan-Dec 2013 is **20,485**  
A member of the Audited Bureau of Circulations



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Apple Watch requires an iPhone to function beyond the watch part, since thirdparty installs are extensions of iPhone apps. Reaction to the device has been mixed, but it holds up as a robust version 1.0 with plenty of potential



# Time to play

Hundreds of **Apple Watch** games already exist, but are any worth even a second of your time?

**A**pple Watch is easy to dismiss as a gaming platform, especially when you have one strapped to your wrist. Even the larger model's screen is tiny, and since Apple would rather you didn't use it at all (thereby keeping the battery alive for a bit longer), the screen blinks off at every available opportunity. The device is mostly silent, bar emitting a shrill ding whenever a notification arrives. And the limitations of the hardware and software result in games – in reality extensions of iPhone apps – that are very basic, with animation that ranges between the staccato jerk of classic Game & Watch and an animated GIF.

You might nonetheless think history's repeating itself, and Apple Watch should be given a chance. After all, the first iPhone was underpowered and initially lumbered with basic web apps. Even when the App Store arrived, it took a good six months before the device's potential became clear; by then, savvy developers had stopped treating the device like a Nintendo handheld that had lost its buttons down the back of the sofa, and instead started developing for the platform's unique capabilities. The likes of *Ellis* ushered in an age of engaging multitouch gaming that rethought interactive entertainment on mobile.

With Apple Watch, clearly, we're still very much on day one, and we don't even have multitouch. There are only basic taps and swipes, to control games almost entirely created by developers who only got their hands on the hardware at the same time as consumers. Upon playing Apple Watch games, it's apparent that many were primarily designed on Macs, without testing anything on wrists. They try to keep



**An Apple Watch app rush was a given, but numbers to date exceed even the wilder industry projections**

you playing for extended sessions, like iPhone titles, but hold your wrist in front of your face, prodding at it with your other hand, and your arms soon start to ache.

This, combined with ambition and a tendency towards tradition, has resulted in some developers trying to do too much, bringing across genres entirely unsuited to the host hardware. *Gravity Mike* wants to be a stripped-down *WWWW*, your character leaping between ceilings and floor keys to unlock exits. But with a framerate, tiny viewport and no control buttons to prod, it's through someone's first fall using BASIC on a ZX81.

Elsewhere, even titles you'd expect to succeed struggle. *Jelly Cubes* vaguely resembles *Threes!*, asking you to match

groups of sliding coloured tiles. On Apple Watch it's robbed of animation and sound, becoming an unpleasant, jarring experience that's a pale shadow of the iPhone version. Meanwhile, *Snaker* barely manages to match the framerate and responsiveness of the *Snake* once enjoyed on '90s Nokia handsets.

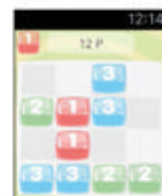
**A glimmer of** promise appears on discovering games clearly designed with the hardware in mind. Such titles are intended to be played in absurdly short bursts, simple in design and forgiving of clumsy fingers prodding at small screens. They are frequently throwaway, but at least provide enough entertainment value that you won't feel inclined to fish for your iPhone when waiting in a queue.

There's a raft of virtual pets for obsessives keen to be frequently bugged for food and adoration, and plenty of super-fast quiz games that put a tiny

number of seconds on the clock and relentlessly challenge you to choose between pairs of answers until your brain gives out. *Peak's* concept is as sparse as it gets: you decide whether the current shape matches the previous one shown. Under pressure, you'll get things wrong,

gnash your teeth, and suddenly realise that, for a brief moment, you were enthralled by an Apple Watch game.

Rifling through other genres further cements the idea that only the concise and simple can survive on Apple Watch. In sport, *Watch This Homerun* hones baseball down to timing a tap when a ball goes over the plate; entire league



**Gravity Mike (£1.49, Alexandre Minard) and Jelly Cubes (79p, Ingolf Koch) try to bring across traditional games to Apple Watch, and merely disappoint**

## EDGE

#### APP HAPPY

Apple coined "There's an app for that!", but sometimes the only appropriate response is: "Yes, but should there be?" Apple Watch had 4,000 apps within a fortnight of launch, including hundreds of items labelled 'games'. Yet on closer inspection, some of these titles aren't games at all – merely companions to their iPhone parents. Mostly, such products are superfluous and likely to irritate anyone auto-installing new Apple Watch apps. For example, Gameloft's racer *Asphalt 8* only lists events and promotions on Apple Watch, while shooter *Modern Combat 5* enables you to change class selection and loadout from your wrist. Some titles go a little further, notably IAP-infused MMO *Battle Camp*, which gives you a pet to raise, Tamagotchi style. Evolve it to 'max' and the iPhone game gives you a free gift, although the lack of notifications means you'll probably instead end up with a tiny digital corpse planted atop your wrist.

championships take place within minutes. Fast-paced word games demand you untangle anagrams. "No levels, no candy, no birds, and no ninjas," yells *Letter Zap*'s App Store description, "just 30 seconds, a mix of letters and your mind". For puzzle fans, *BoxPop* has you pop every box in a grid by making L-shaped leaps, and loses little on its transition to this platform.

This enforced razor-sharp focus sometimes takes a while to warm to. *Rules!* was big on iPhone, Apple awarding it 'Best of 2014'. It's a sweet-natured memory test in which you tap cards according to rules ('highest first', 'monsters facing left') dished out every round. The game gets tough when a dozen or more rules are floating around your head. On Apple Watch it's reimagined as a compact, streamlined daily challenge – a succinct slice of brain training. At first it disappoints, but over a few days its simple charms win you over. Brevity encourages habit, and the original concept remains strong enough to counter its less sophisticated container.

Curiously, one genre on Apple Watch almost seeks to do the opposite, so-called 'idle' games being dressed up as fuller adventures. *Runeblade* finds you facing off against an endless array of snakes, wolves, bears and other creatures, and continues to play in the background when you don't fancy tapping at your wrist. Similarly, *Cupcake Dungeon* has you smack little blobby cartoon critters with a stick, gradually amassing coins for upgrading your weaponry.

**Such titles are** true time-wasters, and lack genuine entertainment value unless you're an obsessive type, but they



**Spy\_Watch (£1.49, Bossa Studios Ltd) has you direct a spy from your wrist. Just like real spies...**

nonetheless hit on a theme that has much to offer on Apple Watch: games where things happen when you're not playing. Reskinned cookie-cutter knockoffs lack the depth to truly innovate in this area, but two early Apple Watch titles reimagine idle games as conversations, effectively turning your device into a sci-fi wrist communicator from a 1980s TV show.

In *Spy\_Watch*, you're informed that your father has died, and you've inherited a spy agency that was previously under his command. Your Apple Watch becomes a tiny window into a world of espionage as the agent under your guidance darts off on missions. Now and again, they'll ask for instructions, and you fire off orders by tapping an action button. The concept is sound, but the execution is lacking. There's scant context for decisions, so everything feels a bit random, and the writing can be soulless. Time is dealt with oddly, with lengthy sequences happening in very little real time. The spy also does whatever they feel like if you're too busy to deal with them, adding a dash of reality, but also frustration.

However, a few days spent with *Spy\_Watch* is enough to recognise that the problem isn't with the basic concept,

form factor, hardware or even the structure of the game, but its writing and pacing. Fortunately, one Apple Watch game gets all of these things right.

*Lifeline* opens with a plea: "Help me". Somehow, stranded astronaut Taylor has managed to get in touch, and is desperate for your assistance, so they can stay alive on an unknown planet. The app also works on iPhone, but perhaps uniquely in these early days of the platform, it only really makes sense on Apple Watch. As you scroll through the messages and offer suggestions by tapping buttons, there's an intimacy that wouldn't exist even with a smartphone. Despite the basic nature of your replies, you somehow feel like a conversation is occurring. Although *Lifeline* is played in silence, there's nonetheless a palpable atmosphere that elevates it above anything else on the platform.

Here the timing works, hours going by between communications if Taylor beds down for the night or begins a lengthy task. Savvy writing helps, too, and while the messages you receive might often seem flippant and wordy, peel away that veneer and the 'person' on the other end of the line is full of desperation and fear. Scared and alone, Taylor's depending on you for comfort and survival, and you'll soon discover how heartbreaking it is should you fail.

At present, *Lifeline* is appropriately named –

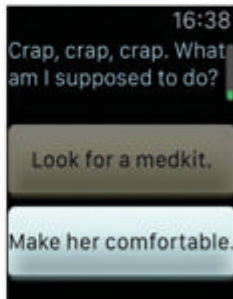
not only for its subject matter, but also in being a lifeline for Apple Watch gaming. While *Rules!* and *Peak* can be entertaining, this is captivating and compelling – a game you'll return to on Apple Watch not because it's the device you have to hand, but because it's a game you want to play. It showcases what's possible, even on hardware as esoteric and limited by design as this. Whether it remains an anomaly or the first of a new breed depends on how other developers respond, but if more of them innovate and design for the hardware and how it's used, there remains hope for Apple Watch gaming yet. ■







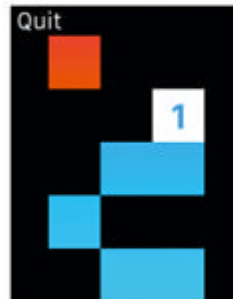
**Snaker**  
Mostafa Ashour – 79p



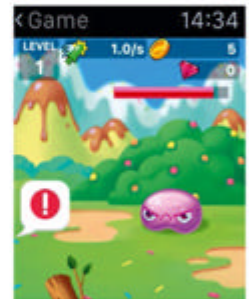
**Lifeline**  
3 Minute Games – £2.29



**Battle Camp**  
PennyPop – Free + IAP



**BoxPop**  
Freshplanet Inc – Free + IAP



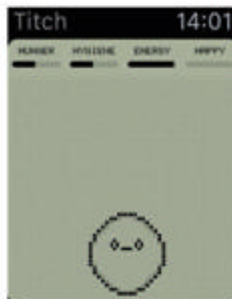
**Cupcake Dungeon**  
WearGa – Free



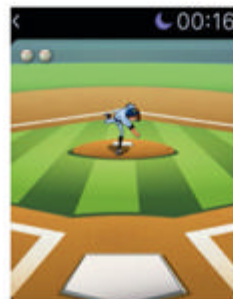
**Elementary Minute**  
Klemens Strasser – 79p



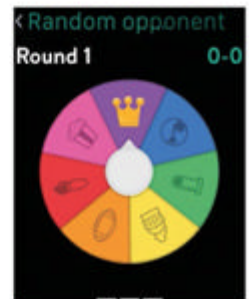
**Video Poker - Watch Edition**  
Alexandre Minard – 79p



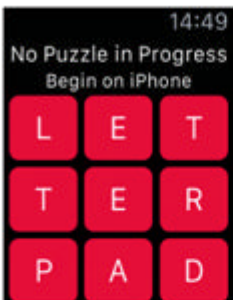
**Hatchi**  
Portable Pixels – 99p + IAP



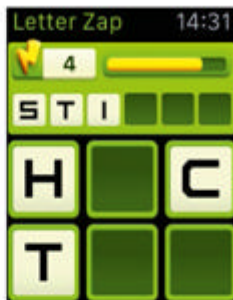
**Watch This Homerun**  
Eyes Wide Games – £1.49



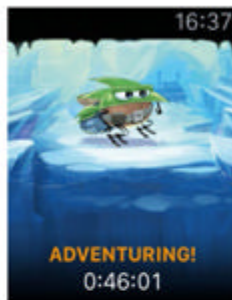
**Trivia Crack**  
Etermax – Free



**Letterpad**  
NimbleBit – Free + IAP



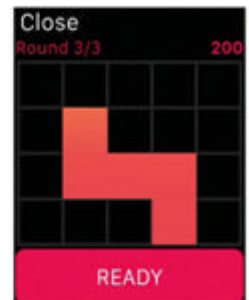
**Letter Zap**  
Fanatee – Free + IAP



**Best Fiends**  
Seriously – Free + IAP



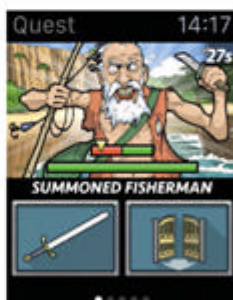
**Pantagu**  
Nomtasticapps – Free



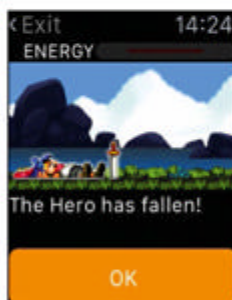
**Peak: Brain Training**  
Brainbow – Free + IAP



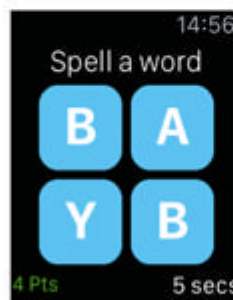
**Rules!**  
TheCodingMonkeys – £2.29



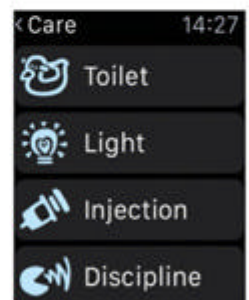
**Runeblade**  
Everywear Games – Free



**Watch Quest! Heroes Of Times**  
WayForward Technologies – Free + IAP



**Snappy Word**  
Right Pedal Studios – Free + IAP



**Tamagotchi Classic**  
Bandai Namco – £2.29



Bethesda was hardly untouched by the debacle, and issued a placating statement of its own, concluding with: "Even though we had the best intentions, the feedback has been clear – this is not a feature you want. Your support means everything to us, and we hear you"



# No mod cons

How Valve's mishandled **experiment in modding** revealed a streak of mortality in a deified company

On April 23, yet another limb was grafted onto Steam's knotty torso, allowing *Skyrim* modders to charge for their work. To Valve, the move might have seemed like the logical extension of a community marketplace that makes barons of the designers talented, and to some extent lucky, enough to trade in cosmetics for *Team Fortress*, *Dota 2* and *Counter-Strike*. Of course, it blew up instantly and spectacularly as Steam users revolted against the change, publicly underlining the extent to which the storefront owner's once-impeccable reputation has become tarnished.

Valve's development process has always been to boot ideas into the world and see which stick. Many do. The studio is an exceptional game developer, and the legacy of its most inspired creations is still felt in the parroted '*Half-Life 3* confirmed' comments left on the Internet each day. The admiration, and to a degree reverence, Valve commanded was initially a product of its fierce innovation; *Half-Life* was a counterpoint to what CEO **Gabe Newell** perceived as systemic blandness in the FPS genre.

Valve's release schedule conforms to unknowable cosmic diktats, but even at its least communicative, it always felt as if it understood players. *Dota 2* and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* are iterations of familiar ideas, but both sit among the most played games in the world because Valve knew how to nurture communities as only an avid group of players could. Newell was more guildmaster than executive officer. The events surrounding paid modding, however, suggest that some of Valve's perspective has been lost. In the perpetual gloom that dominated the Reddit threads and the Steam and

**LEGAL FEES**  
Though Valve's initial take on the issue of modders' compensation was swiftly killed, some of the issues that it raised are proving harder to put down. Should the best modders be rewarded for their work, and if so, what better way is there than the disastrous system featured on Steam? One recurring proposal in Reddit threads and news site comments has been the implementation of a 'donate' button alongside mods in the Workshop, the common assertion being first that altruistic players are ready and willing to repay creators (a claim contested by Scott Reismanis, among others), and second that Valve and Bethesda cannot legally take a share of donated income. "There seems no legal reason why a commercial donation could not be shared between multiple parties," says Jas Purewal. "Charitable donations could have issues, but gamers aren't donating money to charity when they pay for games!"



Bethesda blogs, Valve could have announced the End Of Days for all the difference it would have made to the mood. Four days after launching the feature, the company suspended the programme and refunded all purchases alongside a frank confession on the Steam Workshop blog that "we didn't understand exactly what we were doing".

To not understand what it is doing is an unprecedented position for a studio whose followers once delighted in propagating an illusion of omnipotence. The modding debacle did not differ, after all, from Valve's tried-and-true strategy of dropping ideas on its fanbase. What Valve seems to have missed this time is that the modding community at large is not its fanbase, and the *Skyrim* modding scene in particular is by now a complicated shanty town full of lean-tos, all propping up one another.

"I don't think there was any easy way of bringing in paid modding support," says **Scott 'INtense!' Reismanis**, founder of DBolical, which comprises ModDB, IndieDB and SlideDB. "But Valve brought it into arguably the biggest modded game in the world, which was going to be horrible considering those modders had been working in the ecosystem for four years and there are hundreds of thousands of creations leaning on one another. Valve eased it into *Team Fortress* and *Counter-Strike* – they already had their own paid loot crates built into the product, and then they allowed the community to start submitting content, and there was no uproar there."

**"Valve brought it into arguably the biggest modded game in the world, which was going to be horrible"**

Paid stores stocked with community content are old news. And, as Reismanis points out, many high-profile games make (or intend to make) money in just that way: it's a selling point of *Landmark* and *EverQuest Next*, and a pillar of Epic's new *Unreal Tournament*. Valve appears to have riled people by overstepping its bounds – it owns Steam, yes, but because the service has swelled without restraint, comprising first only triple-A before absorbing indie games and even works-in-progress, almost nothing in its library is Valve-brand. The move towards paid modding was often perceived as an unaffiliated platform holder installing a toll gate around content that was other

people's, doing little but to Hoover up revenue.

**Huge resources of** free mods exist, but though Valve and high-profile supporters such as *Garry's Mod* creator Garry Newman stressed that charging is merely one option available to

creators, the unsettling truth for many is that, as the single biggest gaming storefront, Steam sets precedent. The troubling question is who else would follow suit. Reismanis, however, has proclaimed ModDB a free service in perpetuity, while Nexus's Robin Scott proselytised against the 'DRMification' of mods in a Reddit conversation, garnering himself 5,000 upvotes and four rounds of Reddit Gold.

"The fact that we may have free mods and [others] may have paid mods I don't think necessarily fractures the community," Reismanis says, "but I think that if there ▶



FROM TOP DBolical founder Scott Reismanis; Jas Purewal of Purewal & Partners



is no alternative place to get those mods then, as happened with this drama, Valve or the creator can influence things or move things in the direction they want them to move in.

"In a DRMed ecosystem we can't really exist unless the developer chooses to let their mods go. So that's where this backlash that Valve's experienced may mean that they're going to have to consider an approach where if you want the convenience of Steam's platform and one-click install of mods and automatic updates, then maybe you pay for that convenience, but I think it's important for there to exist a counter to that, which would be, say, the Nexus or ModDB where it's not as easy, but you don't necessarily have to pay for the content."

DRM was a rallying point for paid modding's detractors; the subject on which Valve has been least well received for many months, coming off contradictory at best, and hypocritical at worst. Newell himself railed against Microsoft, Windows 8 and the tightly controlled Windows Store in 2012, attributing the success of Valve to the openness of PCs. "We've been a free rider, and we've been able to benefit from everything that went into PCs and the Internet, and we have to continue to figure out how there will be open platforms." Here, three years later, is a service that tacitly encourages mod makers to release their work across fewer channels to collect a pay cheque instead.

Eighteen months ago, Gabe Newell, or rather the semi-mythical idea of Gabe Newell, was infallible. Searching Google Images for 'Gaben' still reveals his face photoshopped onto Jesus, Ned Stark on the Iron Throne, and an unofficial jumper which his faithful could own for \$70. But when he took to Reddit personally to defuse tensions around paid modding – a Q&A of the sort that Reddit helped raise \$500,000 for charity to secure in January 2014 – the catastrophic swing in public opinion was made clear. "If you are looking for Gabe's comments, you

will need to look at his profile as he is getting downvoted so much," user thisbymaster records.

The feeling of a dominant company passing responsibility to the less well resourced was reinforced by the voluntary removal of Chesko's *Art Of The Catch* mod within hours of the paid storefront going live because its animations leaned upon the free *Fores New Idles* in *Skyrim* to run. Given the importance of interdependency to modding, it's unthinkable that Valve did not foresee the problem and prepare a robust legal response. By Chesko's account, he'd raised the issue with Valve before the mod's release to a reply that does not inspire confidence: "I am not a lawyer, so this does not constitute legal advice. If you are unsure, you should contact a lawyer. That said, I spoke with our lawyer and having mod A depend on mod B is

fine – it doesn't matter if mod A is for sale and mod B is free, or if mod A is free or mod B is for sale."

This statement suggests that Valve was broadly aware of the legal murkiness, but was unwilling to espouse any one interpretation, passing the headache of digital

copyright law to modders while retaining its cut. **Jas Purewal**, of Purewal & Partners, a specialist legal consultancy in the digital entertainment industry, stresses the uncertainty of laws that haven't adapted to address modding.

"In general terms," Purewal tells us, "if someone creates a paid version of software that is based on preexisting software, then they would need the preexisting software owner's consent to use or commercialise the paid version. However, where we're talking about mods, it depends heavily on what the underlying game developer/publisher has permitted in its terms and conditions."

The *Skyrim* Creation Kit EULA does not specify ownership – a move Purewal thinks likely deliberate – and these issues have never been tested in a legal context. The Valve of the '90s, however, intent on sticking one in the eye of convention and

megacorps, might at least have attempted to formulate a watertight system that would protect the thousands of spare-time creators reliant upon it. The Valve that developed *Half-Life* brazenly remade the genre, taking on an informed but vast risk in doing so. It attempted to follow the same formula with modding, dropping a radical idea without appreciating that dozens of disparate gaming communities would be unwilling to weather the aftershocks. Valve's repeated insistence that the Steam community police itself against the unpleasantness that its own experiments precipitate can come across as faintly insulting.

**"In general we** are pretty reluctant to tell any developer that they have to do something," Newell's AMA reads. "It just goes against our philosophy to be dictatorial." Far from heartening, it reminded many in the thread of Valve's weaknesses in recent months and exposed Newell to attack on two fronts. For each success that Early Access and Greenlight (which Newell references apologetically) have effected, the near absence of moderation has buried what was a prestigious storefront in abandoned projects and games such as *Hatred* and *Kill The Faggot* (which eventually did provoke intervention) that exist to offend.

Valve's intended, hands-off solution to the mod problem was to offer refunds within 24 hours of purchasing a mod, but that seems not to account for the fluidity of a mod's functionality as it runs up against game updates and compatibility issues with other mods. The question of who is responsible when a mod ceases to function looks to have been sidestepped as well.

"In the EU and in other countries," Purewal tells us, "a sale to a consumer comes by default with certain legal protections, including that the sold item will actually work within certain standards. It's common for retailers to attempt to exclude those laws from their sales, but to what extent that works legally for games has not really been tested."

"For the professional, serious mod teams," Reismanis says, "the opportunity

Here is a service that tacitly encourages mod makers to release their work across fewer channels



to earn money I think will mean that they do ensure the compatibility of the current game is there. However, the double-edged sword is that if teams are now motivated by money, naturally everything tails off once popularity dies down, and that sort of comes back to the Greenlight and the Early Access problem that Steam has, where these games sold incredibly well on a concept and now they're unsupported."

Over the past two years, as Steam has grown almost exponentially and its own-brand games have dried up, Valve has shown little understanding that its responsibilities as a publisher and custodian are worlds away from those it bore as a maverick developer. Steam has seen improvements – few remember the rickety update dispensary it was at release – but failed ideas casually doled out, retracted, patched and apologised for grate at a community more numerous by far than Valve's disciples. Meanwhile, a series of imperfect new systems that ask for money from the community with no guarantees of a working product suggests that it's accountants, not coders, that hold sway at Valve HQ. Paid modding will come again and it will be a vital test of Valve's capacity to address a community that is no longer truly its own. ■



Valve has long made money off of mods for its own software, but monetising *Skyrim* mods felt to many like it had overstepped the mark. It has a lot of thorny issues to address before it can make a second attempt

#### EXTRA CREDIT

Some say that not a penny should be given to modders as payment; others assert that every penny spent on a mod belongs to its creator. Under Steam's short-lived system for *Skyrim* mods, Valve took its standard 30 per cent cut and the remaining cash went to Bethesda to divvy up. It took 45 per cent for itself, explaining that in a normal commercial deal, licensing the IP and the tools to work with it would leave the developer with far less than a quarter share. To a community not previously exposed to commercial reality, the numbers felt wrong, and though Bethesda avoided much of this round of public displeasure, the spotlight might shift if Valve makes a stronger second attempt.



# Buzz words

Andrew Eades recounts the highs and lows of 12 years of Relentless Software

A sense of humour certainly helps in an industry as unpredictable as this one. Ahead of his talk at this year's Develop conference, in which he's set to discuss his company's history, Relentless Software CEO **Andrew Eades** jokes with self-effacing modesty that "you can probably compress it into: 'We made Buzz.'" And yet there's far more to a studio that's survived a decade in gaming's turbulent waters. We talk to Eades to find out how Relentless has adapted to the industry's evolution.

## Buzz is a major part of your history, but it wasn't an immediate success, was it?

I've got my own theories on this – and I'm sure Sony marketing would say something different – but we designed the first Buzz game with Christmas Day very much in mind. And once friends and families started playing it at social events during that period, that's when people went out and bought it in January. We released it in October, and you're right, it was a bit of a slow burn. Obviously, back then we didn't have any telemetry, so we didn't have any idea when people unboxed it and started playing it, but we think a lot of [its success] was basically down to word of mouth. And then it just sold for an astonishing number of weeks – I think it was in the top 20 for over a year.

Buzz came out the same kind of era as *Guitar Hero*, and *Singstar* had been before us, so there was a definite move to broader content. As [Sony UK boss] Ray Maguire put it, "I've sold as many PlayStation 2s as I can to gamers; we need to find a new audience," and that's what we were looking for. When we founded Relentless, we were thinking there was a great opportunity on PS2. It was cheap, and lots of people were buying it as a DVD player. We wanted

## CONVERGENCE OF CULTURE

As someone whose job is to predict the future, what does Eades see coming for Relentless and the industry in the coming years? "The sort of area I'm really interested in exploring – and *The Trace* does this a bit – is where digital interactive entertainment marries traditional forms like TV and film," he tells us. "The segregation of games from other entertainment is going to disappear – you'll have people [asking], 'Do I want to watch *The Killing* or experience it?' and you'll be able to hop in and out. That's where I think it might end up, but who knows? I just hope that we're still doing good work and enjoying the art of games while also being successful."



*The Trace* builds on top of Relentless's *Murder Files* series, which was originally conceived for PS3 but found its eventual home on the touchscreens of Apple users worldwide

to focus on people who weren't naturally gamers but we could entertain.

## Do you feel you were ahead of the curve in that regard?

Yeah, we were. I mean, the reason I joined Computer Artworks [the company at which Eades met Relentless co-founder David Amor] was to make content for non-gamers. We started with *DJ: Decks & FX*, which wasn't really a game, just virtual decks. But I went to Three, the mobile phone network, because I believed that everyone would have a broadband-connected mobile gaming device in their pockets – and it turns out I was right, I was just about five years early. Now we're making games for devices that people just have: they don't buy them because they're gamers, they simply have them and therefore they play games on them.

## You've enjoyed some success on the App Store with crime drama *The Trace*. Do you think that Apple is pushing premium games a little harder these days?

Well, I believe all the platform holders, Apple included, want to showcase their formats. It's the same with Sony and Microsoft, who we've worked very closely with: they want their platform to look better than everyone else's, and they're going to showcase the best stuff they can, quite rightly. And you can do it with a small team or a bigger team – *The Trace* had up to 15 people at one point, so it's a [comparatively] bigger production, but then I believe in quality. I'd rather try to make really high-quality games than churn out a load of low-

quality games. That's what gets me out of bed in the morning.

## As someone who actively supports the British game industry, do you think it's in a strong position now?

I think it's different! I don't think we could call it the same industry, really. I mean, it's changed so radically. From [Relentless's] point of view, I think we've been really good at adapting. Part of my job is to try to think a few years ahead, to prepare us for what I believe is happening. I was saying for a long time, "Console's dead, guys – we've got to think about moving."

And it wasn't like I wanted [consoles] to be dead, I just recognised we were going to struggle in the PlayStation 3 generation.

"Now we're making games for devices people just have: they don't buy them because they're gamers"

## Yet you're currently making a game for PS4 and Xbox One.

[Laughs] Yeah, can't help it, can I? The thing is, we've now got open

console platforms. And it's in our DNA to make something that entertains a group of people in a living room, so it would be churlish not to make a game for those platforms. We're using all our experience in self-publishing, digital distribution, mobile and Unity together to hopefully make a really great game.

## What does Develop mean to you?

It's where the game industry from the UK and farther afield gathers to talk about games, discuss the challenges ahead and celebrate some of the successes. I've been on the advisory board from day one – because I'm local, I reckon – and the game community in Brighton is pretty strong and pretty good. ■



Eades' session at this year's Develop is titled *From Console Superstars To Mobile Wannabes And Back Again*, and will trace the Relentless story across the past decade



# SPEAK OF THE DEVIL

Neostream encourages survivalists with the prospect of idle hands

There's just the slightest hint of *The Wind Waker* in Neostream's recently Greenlit debut, found not only in the art direction and exaggerated, bouncy animation style, but in the whiff of potential adventure that permeates every blade of grass in this expansive world. *Little Devil Inside* is, according to Neostream, an "exploration-focused survival action-RPG" with a fondness for the minutiae of everyday life. To that end, your sorties into the dangerous world find their counterpoint in well-earned

relaxation and amusements once you're safely back within the walls of your home town.

"During a journey, we hope players can feel the hardship, sometimes just wishing to get out of the place, go home, take a warm bath, [eat] a warm meal and have a few pints down at the local pub," **John Choi**, one third of Neostream, tells us. "There has to be danger to feel safe, and vice versa. The more you experience and survive through danger, the more desire you have to continue. However, I've

often felt that just continuous confrontation with danger tires the player out and makes you wonder, 'Why am I going through this? I'll probably end up dead anyway...' Sometimes to the point where I stop playing."

Venture out from the cosseting protection of your pretty hamlet, however, and you'll face the bestiary of creatures that makes up the game's ecosystem – some friendly, others less so. Then there are the elements to worry about: spend too long in the rain and you might catch a cold, your

character's sneezes a stern reminder that you need to find shelter. Funding permitting, Neostream plans to build a world comparable in size to *Borderlands*, so there will be plenty of opportunities to find yourself miles from safety and longing for the comforts of home.

It's a big project for just three people, which is why Neostream plans to expand to a team of 20 in order to create all of the content required to fill that vast world in time for a planned Autumn 2016 release. ■





*Little Devil Inside* casts you as a professor's assistant studying the dangerous world beyond the town's walls. Part of the job is to undertake risky missions, bringing back artefacts and information on creatures, but you'll also have to manage the faculty team



# My Favourite Game

## Kid Ink

The American rapper and beat 'em up fan on keeping the energy in the room and landing hits in everything he does

**Kid Ink** (AKA Brian Todd Collins) began his full-time music career at 22. Since 2012, he's consistently hit the upper echelons of the Billboard 200 chart, reaching the top 20 with debut album *Up & Away*. His third album *Full Speed* charted in the UK Top 10 upon release in February. He will play the Wireless Festival in London on June 28, with a full UK tour in October. Here, the rapper talks playing to psyche himself up for recording, and tattoo death moves.

### What kicked off your interest in games?

I've been playing since I was five years old. *Super Mario*, *Street Fighter*, Sega and Nintendo took up a lot of my time as I was growing up. I was always competitive and games appealed to that side of me. I cut back as I got older, when I wanted to go out, meet girls. But I've always been into it.

### Do you play games in the studio?

I'm very competitive, and really into fighting games like *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*. Whenever I play those, it's always win after win. But if you lose, no matter how many times you've won before, there's always got to be a rematch. You get to thinking about when you lost and that's distracting. It's the energy. I can't lose. And if you're winning, it's a real boost to your ego and confidence. It can get a little distracting, but if it's more fast-paced I can go through rounds with people and then be like, 'I'm going into the [vocal] booth real quick,' and then come back out.

I've tried to play *Madden* in the middle of the studio and *that* doesn't

**DRIVING AMBITION**  
Kid Ink's music has something of an automotive theme. That's no surprise since the rapper is a confirmed car nut, owning, among others, a track-ready Corvette Z06 and a '72 Chevy Nova, which he's had since he was 17. His works in this vein include the theme track for WWE's *Fast Lane* event in February (simply called *Faster*), and a contribution to the *Furious 7* OST, *Ride Out*. It's no surprise that the motif extends to the titles of his albums, *My Own Lane* and *Full Speed*.



really work — that takes about an hour out of every day, whereas you can get a fighting game done in 30 seconds. You can have those moments where you can clear your mind real quick, get a boost to your confidence before getting in the booth. When people don't hear you sounding like you're confident, that you believe in what you're saying, they can't feel it. Sometimes you can say less and people can feel it more than if you're saying a bunch of words and you don't sound confident.

### Does that scale up to helping you succeed in the music industry?

It's the same thing, you know? I feel like I don't like playing videogames by myself as much as I like playing with other people. More so, I don't like being the only person out making music too, or not have

anything to compete with. It's dope to have a lot of songs on the radio, to be at the top of your game, but I feel if there's not enough competition it slows artists down sometimes because they're not feeding off other people, they're just feeding off of themselves.

### If you weren't making music, would you want to create games instead?

I wanted to make videogames at one point. I wanted to go to a school and learn how to make 'em and make some crazy shooting and fighting games. I always wanted to make a celebrity fighting game, like *Celebrity Deathmatch*

but with a realer, *Mortal Kombat*-like status. They came out with different ones with rappers, but that was more like wrestling. I think we need to make a *Mortal Kombat* game like that.

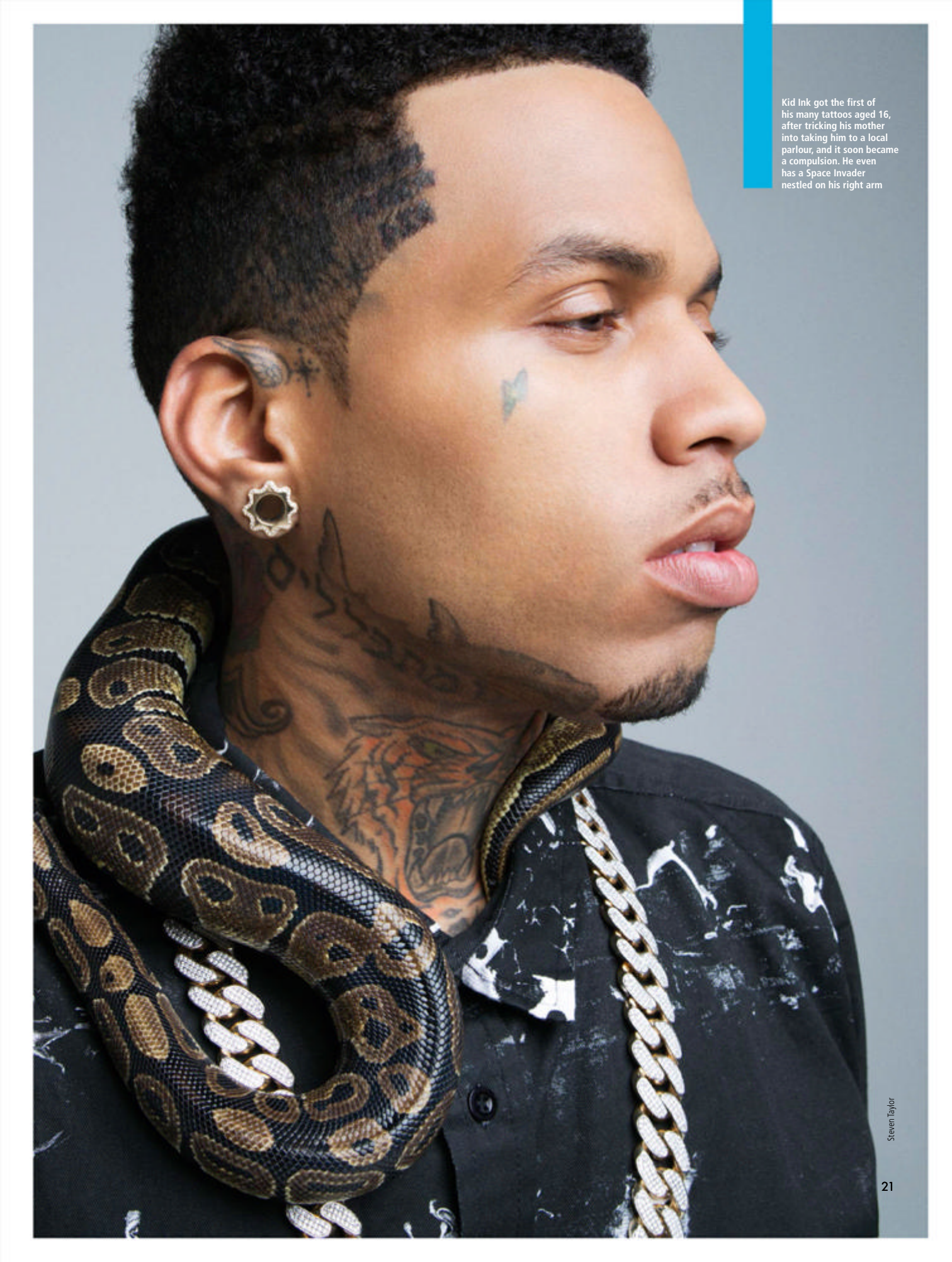
### If you were to feature in that kind of game, how about a special move?

Oh, I'd probably have a move where my tattoos come alive, like one of them jumps off my body and kills you or does something crazy. So, if someone makes this character in a game, you know where it came from!

### And what about your favourite game?

I just love fighting games — *Mortal Kombat* and *Tekken*, but *Street Fighter*'s the one. Ken's my man; he's number one. Guile is my number two, Ryu's my number three, and I think Chun-Li is my number four.

But I'm one of those players who plays and learns so much that I can play with pretty much anyone. I'm big into tactics. I don't like just button bashing. I go through all the tutorials and learn all I can. When I use Ken, it's all played between the Hadouken and the dragon punch. I always try to make sure I'm not the guy where they say, "Oh, you're only good with this one person." There's never just one guy. I think that throws people off, because I think they always want to try to learn your [character]. As soon as somebody's learned that, I just switch over, because I know the same person they keep using, and I'm all good. ■



Kid Ink got the first of his many tattoos aged 16, after tricking his mother into taking him to a local parlour, and it soon became a compulsion. He even has a Space Invader nestled on his right arm



# Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



**"We will pursue mobile games aggressively..."**

Our games must move from selling things like 'items' to things like 'features'."

New Konami CEO **Hideki Hayakawa** puts the whole Kojima/*PT* fuss into fantastically depressing context



"All those years [of] telling people that this kind of game was wanted and being told that I was wrong... **Fuck 'em all!**"

Ex-Rare composer **Grant Kirkhope** keeps his cool after Playtonic's *Banjo-Kazooie* successor, *Yooka-Laylee*, smashes its Kickstarter goal



"If I am ever forced to cover guys playing videogames, **I will retire...** Somebody lock the basement door at mom's house and don't let 'em out."

ESPN anchor **Colin Cowherd** seems completely fine with his employer broadcasting a *Heroes Of The Storm* tournament

"The problem with us as an industry getting so excited about *No Man's Sky* is **I worry we'll have a similar thing to what happened with *Black & White*.**"

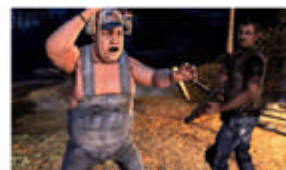
Yeah, that **Peter Molyneux** guy was just the worst, wasn't he, Peter Molyneux?



AP Press Association

## ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



**Game** *Big Buck HD Wild*  
**Manufacturer** Play Mechanix, Raw Thrills

It's been 15 years since *Big Buck Hunter* first hit arcades, and this latest release shows precisely what the makers of a game in this fustiest of genres feel they have to do to remain relevant after all that time. Now running in 1080p, as the name suggests, and on an 80-inch monitor, *Big Buck HD Wild* uses an Internet connection for DLC updates, realtime multiplayer matchmaking, sharing your results on Facebook and Twitter, national leaderboard rankings, and also processing credit card payments.

Of course, not even a gigabit connection could turn a lightgun game into anything other than a lightgun game. As ever, the objective in the main mode is to down three bucks without killing any does, although here the action is set in 9,000BC, your prey is the long-extinct Irish Elk, and you're distracted by onrushing sabre-tooth tigers. Elsewhere, a bonus game riffs on 1990s digitised shooting galleries, while one side mode offers a licensed hookup with popular US reality show *Duck Dynasty*.

All told, it's a fine way of explaining what's kept *Big Buck* games installed in US sports bars for the past decade and a half, but *Wild*'s other headline-grabbing addition is about as unimaginative as lightgun games get. Yup, there's a zombies mode. OK, there may be a thematically appropriate riff on the idea – with zombie chickens, raccoons, deer and bears joining the lumbering undead – but it's a strange thing to see in a game whose success is due in large part to offering something that other cabs don't.



# MAKING GAMES IN SWITZERLAND



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## WEBSITE

### Zelda live map

[jadsdengine.com/zeldalivemap.htm](http://jadsdengine.com/zeldalivemap.htm)

A group of developers are recreating locations from *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* in-browser, using Javascript animator JADSDS. Swooping across the live Light World map with no restrictions as NPCs go about their business is curiously empowering, and the wider field of view provides insight into the construction of the world. Since it uses HTML5, you can reminisce on all sorts of devices, and if you're interested in the tech, the site includes documentation on the code that powers each scene. Along with the Light World, you can also visit the more modestly sized Zora's Domain, while the Playground section of the website includes a selection of animations from the likes of *Street Fighter* and *Mario* alongside editable code that lets you experiment.



## VIDEO

### The Hedgehog

[vimeo.com/117371025](https://vimeo.com/117371025)

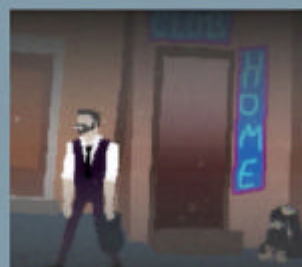
Directed by filmmaking team Chris Lee and Paul Storrie, *The Hedgehog* puts a rather dour spin on Sega's normally ebullient erinaceidae. The Harmony Korine-esque short film tells the story of two individuals who, in their own ways, are struggling to cope with the realities of life – one, a boy dressed in a homemade Sonic costume searching for adventure, the other a man with more than a passing resemblance to Dr Robotnik. It's a heavy-going six minutes that's entirely free from dialogue, but there's an undeniable beauty to the stark short, which has picked up plaudits on the circuit.

## WEB GAME

### A Box Full Of Joy

[gamejolt.com/games/adventure/a-box-full-of-joy/67266/](http://gamejolt.com/games/adventure/a-box-full-of-joy/67266/)

Daniil Ermakov's Lynchian point-and-click adventure *A Box Full Of Joy* is a short, sharp blow to the head that revels in gallows humour. The game's look sits in a surreal space somewhere between *Hotline Miami* and *Cruise For A Corpse* and casts you as Frank, a man who comes to, with a nasty-looking wound, in an alley. Over the course of the game you replay the same scene as you learn about your past through a series of creepily detached characters, all the while wielding the knife that punctured you, plus a bottle of pills from a hooded guy you meet on the dance floor. Buttons to dodge in either direction prove oddly flaccid inclusions, but the journey is well worth a couple of attempts in order to play out the different endings.



# THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

## EYE TRACKER

### SteelSeries Sentry

[www.bit.ly/SentryEye](http://www.bit.ly/SentryEye)

Normally, we'd kill anything with a terrible red gaze on principle alone. But despite its baleful glare, this might be the most quietly revolutionary – albeit incredibly niche – piece of tech no one has to strap over their eyeballs in 2015. In its most useful guise, the Sentry is to eSports what a good coach is to any other athlete, recording your viewpoint as you perform so you can tune your focus. *StarCraft II* and *Dota 2* are specially provided for, but the associated suite can overlay a view hotspot on any game you can stream. Imagine being able to see how Daigo reads a *Street Fighter* match and you'll grasp the potential. Outside that sphere, however, it's a pricey curio, though guiding Shay Connor through *Assassin's Creed: Rogue* by gaze alone offers a tantalising look at what might happen to game cameras when our view is finally unbound from the right stick.



## continue quit

### E3 gossip

A bit quiet this month, so we're making stuff up. Sources say Yuji Naka's playable in *SFV*

### The Witcher Free

16 bits of DLC for zilch?

This is how you do it

### Mod Santos

Tackling *GTAV* as a horse, in a ragtop, with moon gravity. Essential

### Sega rallies

Sega pulls 19 mobile games for not meeting new standards. Progress

### Apple Watch game control

Just what we always wanted: a second screen for our second screen

### Chromatic abhorration

Turn it down a bit, hmm?

### Calendar clash

*The Witcher III* and *Destiny* DLC on the same day. How can we cope?

### Konami

Remember that amazing golden age, way back in the '90s? \*cries\*

## TWEETS

Hey Treyarch, Adam Jensen says welcome on the bandwagon! The liquor bar is at the back :)

**Jonathan J-B** @Jonatchoo  
Executive art director,  
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided

Considering ppl who buy a New 3DS are the core of the core why are all the new cases covered in Disney princesses?

**James Mielke** @jamesmielke  
Q-Games producer

Just heard that a friend who was just fired by Zynga is being asked to stay on for a few months to train her replacement from India.

**Alex Hutchinson** @bangbangclick  
Creative director, Far Cry 4

One day I'll write a game called "Supply Chain Guru" just to piss off those biz people who stole the name Llamasoft years ago.

**Jeff Minter** @llamasoft\_ox  
Creator, TxK



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# DISPATCHES

## JULY



Issue 280

### Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to [edge@futurenet.com](mailto:edge@futurenet.com). Our letter of the month wins a New Nintendo 3DS XL, supplied by the Nintendo UK store



### Image problem

We all do it – men and women. We flick through a magazine checking out what pleases and displeases our eyes. Only then do we add in textual information, hoping for it to validate or contextualise those judgments. “Wow. That’s impressive for a mobile game.” Screenshots in videogame magazines have always had a big influence on the games and platforms we consider buying. And leafing through **Edge**, it’s always been easy to recognise – from a single screenshot – what platform a game is running on. But recently, it’s become hard even to recognise the generation of a game’s hardware from screenshots alone. And that’s not because screen displays have overtaken the resolution and the bleed properties of printed ink; it’s mostly about diminishing perceptible returns from increased computing power. So, having reached that moment in the evolution of the screenshot, I’d like to make a request to **Edge**: could you please give us a retrospective on this medium?

Static images were never fully representative of game graphics, never mind game quality. But – even in this (second) era of VR – they continue to occupy an important role in our gaming life.

**Matthew Stedman**

Yet, oddly, the difference between publisher bullshot and realtime screengrab has never seemed more stark – and the fuss when the final product fails to live up to the pre-release hype has never been greater. As for some kind of retrospective, we’ll start poking around in the **Edge** archives.

### Loading screed

I met up with my brother the other day to have a gaming evening as we caught up. I took round the new COD, since it would be a good game for some quick action and macho

banter – or at least that was the plan.

First, we had to dig around to find the correct cables to charge his controller and sync mine that I had taken round. Then he had to install the most recent update for his PS3 (he plays more Xbox One), and finally he had to download and install the latest patch. It was at this moment, over an hour after we set out to play a game, that I had a vision for the future of gaming. A future where controllers were wired to the console so they wouldn’t need charging and would be permanently synced, where games were released in their final form so that patches didn’t have to be downloaded, and console menus were streamlined. I know I sound

old. I just don’t feel that we’ve moved on much since when I was six. My ZX Spectrum was quicker than this.

Of course there have been huge advances, mainly in the area of graphics, and often to the detriment of other, maybe more interesting paths. What would games and consoles be like if companies had spent all this money and time on

developing world physics, or enemy AI, or on an experience where it takes less than 30 minutes to get from switching a console on to actually playing a game? I hope, with each new console generation, that a company will make it their mission to reduce waiting times, but instead they just seem to be getting longer.

So I’m left dreaming of an age where I can turn a console on and be playing a game in under ten seconds. It sounds like the stuff of science fiction now, but the sad thing is, we had that age once already. We lost it, and we called it progress.

**Stuart Harper**

One **Edge** associate was so put off by the ordeal of setting up and updating his new PS4 and copy of *Bloodborne* that he’s yet to so much as play the thing. Consoles’

*“I just don’t feel we’ve moved on much since I was six. My ZX Spectrum was quicker than this”*



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suspend and resume features are fine additions, but with day-one patches here to stay – and only getting bigger – the first-time setup process may be beyond saving.

## Fails figures

Marketing budgets have become an influential component to sales expectations for games, and yet it's something that isn't talked about often. Sega put out a press release today, saying that sales haven't lined up with their hopes for *Alien: Isolation*. It sold over 2 million copies. I've read this story before, and I can't help but think that inflated marketing budgets are becoming problematic. It's a jarring story to read, especially when a game like *Cities: Skylines* is considered a success with half the amount of sales. That game didn't have a big E3 reveal, fancy cinematic renders or any kind of expensive marketing material. Its sales potential was also much more narrow considering it's a PC-only release. Despite that, it's turning a profit and the studio seems very pleased with results. It has also benefited from a lower sales price of \$29.99; a variable that traditional big-budget releases have been reluctant to experiment with on initial release. Do publishers need to rethink their approach to marketing and exorbitant campaign spending to stay profitable? Mediums like Twitch, YouTube and digital distribution offer some hope in reducing promotional costs and keeping publishers like Sega in business.

**Kyle Wright**

True enough – new marketing avenues are essential for so many releases nowadays. In *Alien's* case, though, perhaps it's not so much about marketing spend as it is the development budget, licensing costs and, above all, unrealistic expectations.

## Uncool hoarders

Like many fans, I am continually frustrated by the shortage of Amiibo and Nintendo's bone-headed approach and empty promises

to resupply the figures. Yet there are no real shortages of Amiibo. They are available on the Internet from scalpers who charge £30 to £40 (£60 for *Punch-Out's* Little Mac) for a doll that retails at £10.99. However, scalpers are often scapegoated for the problem. The real problem lies with "in-box collectors"; people who want to buy the Amiibo and keep them in their original packaging. Nintendo makes it quite clear that these are toys and not collector's items; they are used to unlock items or add usability to a game. I often read customer reviews complaining that a figure wasn't packaged properly by the retailer, and the cardboard is bent or the plastic has a scratch in it and therefore can't be used in their "collection". The packaging for my Amiibo is in the recycling where it belongs, and my Amiibo are being trained up to level 50 in *Smash Bros*. Maybe Nintendo is to blame for housing these figures in beautiful boxes, but if there are any in-box collectors reading this, may I point you to the Nintendo Official Store where you can find beautiful scale models and statues of Nintendo's most iconic characters. Please leave Amiibo for those of us who actually want to use them.

**Kieran Wood**

Yet those scalpers would not be able to charge such a premium were Amiibo not so supply constrained in the first place. Nintendo knows exactly what it's doing, and exactly how to stop it. Anyway, never mind that – is our Little Mac really worth £60?

## Gore than this

OK, I get it, you guys at **Edge** are great fans of FromSoftware and *Bloodborne*, and I'm sure it's a brilliant, very intelligently designed game. Really, I am, since I have learned to trust your reviews and previews. But I happen to be immune to the appeal of anything that can be described as "horror", particularly qualified with adjectives such as "gothic" or "supernatural". I guess that *Bloodborne* and *Dark Souls* are out, then.

The problem is that the gaming landscape of early 2015 looks pretty barren for my kind of player, at least as far as big-budget, triple-A titles are concerned. Away from *Bloodborne*, we've had *The Order: 1886*. Do I want to immerse myself in a steampunk Victorian London where hostile monsters lurk in the smog? Not particularly. That's two out of two juggernaut PlayStation exclusives so far. And last year, what did we have? *The Last Of Us Remastered*, a game set in a post-apocalyptic world in which a fungus slowly eats off people's faces while they're still alive. Sorry, but no. The year before, I gave up on the reboot of *Tomb Raider* halfway through. Do I have to add that the Hive would have ruined *Destiny* for me if it hadn't disappointed me already, or have I got my point across?

What happened to us gamers (at least the majority, to whom I suppose these expensive productions have to appeal)? Are we so damaged that only the most extreme suffering and despair can pique our interest? I'm not a preacher or a prude who thinks that we should only play *Tearaway*. As a matter of fact, I quite enjoy violent games like *Grand Theft Auto*. But the sick, deranged kind of killing, the utterly depressing worlds from which all hope and all lightness are banned, deeply upset me.

I'm not saying that horror games should not exist, but I'm concerned that they have become too prevalent. As the list above tries to illustrate, it has become quite hard to find a major franchise that doesn't have some gratuitously gruesome element to it, at least on console. I hope that promising future releases such as *No Man's Sky* (which currently doesn't seem to have any horror in it) will prove me wrong.

**Fabrice Saffre**

Well, quite – this is still a broad church, but you wouldn't think so from a look at the sales charts. Happily, your New 3DS XL has an expansive library of smiling faces, clear blue skies, and very few severed heads. ■





STEVEN POOLE

## Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

By the time you read this column, the outcome of the giant social game of lying and posturing called ‘the General Election’ will be known, and another five-year social game of lying and posturing called ‘a Parliament’ will have begun. Heaven forfend, though, that I sound too cynical. There were some bright moments in the campaign, none more so than when Ed Miliband appeared on Absolute Radio and said he enjoyed playing *Manic Miner* as a child. It’s a pleasing sign of the times. Once, such a confession would have marked a politician out as a weird geek. Now just the opposite: it made Miliband seem reassuringly normal. Weird would be a fortysomething without fond memories of playing games.

The choice of *Manic Miner*, of course, was brilliant. The game was written by a lone British genius, Matthew Smith, and so spurs nationalist pride of the respectable, non-UKIP kind. And its title subliminally recalls the glory anti-Thatcher days of Arthur Scargill and the miners’ strike. Smith’s follow-up, *Jet Set Willy*, was the more original and ambitious game, but it just wouldn’t have played as well on the radio. The young Ed Miliband could hardly have explored such a huge mansion without wanting to slap a massive tax on it.

David Cameron, for his part, missed a trick by not reminiscing about another Spectrum classic, *Automania*, in which the working-class hero, Wally, builds cars in a factory while dodging injurious robots and fatal bouncing tyres and fan blades. Wally is obviously grateful to be on a zero-hours contract, and any attempt to regulate his workplace so that worker death happened less frequently would amount to health and safety gone mad.

Regulations, of course, are part of the ‘red tape’ that right-wing politicians are always promising to get rid of, yet somehow end up increasing. This is one of the excellent points made in *The Utopia Of Rules*, the new book by the anarchist anthropologist David



The young Ed Miliband could hardly have explored a huge mansion without wanting to slap a massive tax on it

Graeber, figurehead of the Occupy Wall Street movement and author of *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. In writing about rules, of course, he occasionally writes about games. It’s just a shame that he usually uses them to metaphorically criticise something else.

Noting the surprising recent increase in the number of bank lobbies in New York City, Graeber mentions the antiseptic, smooth environments of 3D games from the 1990s, and comments of the bank experience: “It’s as if we have finally achieved the ability to make such virtual realities materialise, and in so doing, to reduce our lives, too, to a kind of

video game, as we negotiate the various mazeways of the new bureaucracies. Since, in such video games, nothing is actually produced, it just kind of springs into being, and we really do spend our lives earning points and dodging people carrying weapons.”

We know what Graeber means when he writes “reduce our lives to a kind of video game”, but one does want to suggest that the very best videogames might not count as a “reduction”. At least for a bit, compared to much of what we are obliged to do in our everyday lives: filling in forms and grimly padding out desk-time, which is, after all, the stuff of modern existence that Graeber himself is writing a book to decry.

Some videogames, too, take what is oppressive in life and retool it for pleasurable purposes. Graeber notices that board-based RPGs are themselves quite bureaucratic, and argues sadly that they “ultimately reinforce the sense that we live in a universe where accounting procedures define the very fabric of reality”. But perhaps a more optimistic reading is possible: one that pays due respect to how videogames, as art, can take an evil aspect of reality and aestheticise it, transmuting it into a source of joy.

What is a roleplaying videogame, after all, but essentially a simulation of automated bureaucracy that is designed to give pleasure, rather than designed to frustrate and alienate? If only filling out a credit card application form were as interesting and predictable in its effects as levelling up your sword-wielding medieval sociopath. *Manic Miner*, too, sings an inspiring hymn to the human spirit in hauling a nasty and dangerous experience into the realm of surreal comic fantasy. We could even hope that one day a game could make electoral politics seem like something other than the grim duty of choosing the least bad option, and more like a celebration of humanity’s social virtues. In art, nothing is impossible.

Steven Poole’s *Trigger Happy 2.0* is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at [www.stevenpoole.net](http://www.stevenpoole.net)



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IAN BOGOST

## Difficulty Switch

Hard game criticism

By now, I should have learned to be surprised by nothing, but the genre name ‘toys-to-life’ still startled me. And not because it’s new, either. It’s the name given to game-and-toy lines such as *Skylanders*, which inaugurated the segment, along with its follow-ups, including *Disney Infinity*, *Amiibo* and *Lego Dimensions*.

The premise is straightforward enough: there’s a game that interfaces with physical toys by means of a reader. *Skylanders* toys use embedded radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags so the game can read them when placed on a peripheral ‘portal’. *Amiibo* take advantage of the Wii U GamePad’s near-field communication (NFC) capability instead. Once connected, the game identifies the specific character figure and makes use of it somehow. What that means depends on the title. In *Skylanders*, figurines become playable characters with different capacities. In some games, *Amiibo* simply unlock trinkets, but other Nintendo titles use the figures to summon characters in-game. There are more variations, too, such as the Hasbro-Rovio collaboration *Angry Birds* Telepods, which uses QR codes, and Spinmaster’s *Sick Bricks*, a game-and-toy product for mobile devices.

All of the toys-to-life titles have enjoyed enormous success, with many millions of units of *Skylanders*, *Disney Infinity* and *Amiibo* sold. Since they are both toys and games, and since one game can inspire the purchase of many toys, toys-to-life games are commercial triumphs that risk becoming boondoggles – kids begging their parents for another figure to collect, whether or not they pair it with a videogame. In the case of *Amiibo* in particular, fan obsession and the relative functional independence and renown of the characters makes them targets for collectors, cubicle dwellers, and the children to whom they are purportedly marketed.

But ‘toys-to-life’? Really? Something about this name cuts to the heart of contemporary life, excising its weirdest and most dubious dimensions.



‘Toys-to-life’? Something about this cuts to the heart of contemporary life, excising its weirdest dimensions

The name makes logical sense. Games like *Skylanders* promise to take fixed, inanimate, painted toy figurines and ‘bring them to life’ inside a game. Of course, upon hearing such an explanation, the smarmy codger in all of us might raise a fist and cry, “Toys already have a life!” and lament today’s youth and their inability to invest inanimate forms with meaning absent of software to do it for them. But this is an unfair characterisation, because those who buy, display and play with toys-to-life game figures don’t necessarily do so in a game. In fact, they’re just as likely to collect, showcase and play with the toys in

the usual fashion – that is, by grasping them in the hand and making believe, or by setting them on the shelf to signal personal affinity.

So it’s too easy to lament toys-to-life as the victory of the virtual over the real, the digital over the physical. In truth, the videogames themselves are often fairly lamentable, predictable affairs compared to the intricate, creative design of the figurines. Something stranger is happening: toys-to-life games derive meaning in the physical world precisely because they emanate from the digital world. Software, smartphones, game consoles and computers are not accessories or accidents, but the very fonts from which meaning and media now issue.

It may sound strange, but doesn’t it make sense? Where does meaning start today? With the phone in your pocket, the laptop on your desk, the console in your cabinet. From there, from apps and websites and games and thinkpieces and all the rest, we begin the process of integrating new ideas and experiences into our worldly lives.

And, in truth, as those who grew up in the 1970s and ‘80s and whose children now long for toys-to-life figurines, we were no less scripted by media. Except, instead of computers and phones, it was television. The likes of He-Man and Rainbow Brite moved from TV to toy stores (or, in some cases, from comic book to television, and then on to toy stores). Anything that ought to have existed first existed on TV – sometimes as media, sometimes just as notification, in the form of the advert, a form that has also given way to the computer in its own manner.

Every era has its dominant media form, the valve through which ideas and products have means to enter, and thrive by entering wisely. The success of toys-to-life can’t be attributed to the fact they are toys brought to life in computers. Instead, it’s because today everything is only real or ‘alive’ insofar as it starts in a computer in the first place.

*Ian Bogost is an author and game designer. His award-winning A Slow Year is available at [www.bit.ly/1eQalad](http://www.bit.ly/1eQalad)*

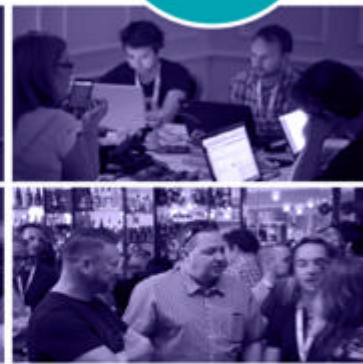
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NATHAN BROWN

## Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

About a week or so afterwards, I think I've just about come to terms with the outcome of the UK election. Like a review of a terribly overlong JRPG, I can't say I enjoyed the process, and the ending left me deeply resentful of the countless, ultimately pointless hours of hot air that had preceded it, but there was at least a sense of relief that it was all over. The whole thing really dragged towards the end, and I felt pretty sorry for the press that had to cover it. One of the broadsheets ran a live blog on its website a couple of days before polling day; one of the party leaders had just walked off a stage somewhere and the writer admitted that, after all these months of campaigning, there were never going to be any surprises in a candidate's stump speech.

Reading that, I realised two things. The first was that I am unbelievably lucky to write about videogames for a living, but I have that thought three or four times a day, so it doesn't really count. The other was that I was suddenly even more excited about E3 than usual. This is a brilliant time of year for games. The weeks leading up to the biggest show on Earth are a giddy swirl of widely reported rumours, whispered secrets and the odd genuine leak. Anticipation is feverish, and perhaps educated, but never really informed. Anyone who tells you they know exactly what's going to go down at E3 is lying, but that doesn't stop any of us having a bloody good go at predicting it. Yet guesswork soon gives way to passion, and before long we're no longer talking about what we *think* we'll see, but what we *want* to.

Those wishlists make for fascinating reading. By the time you read this, E3 will be just days away, so go to your forum or comments section of choice and find a discussion about what people expect, or want, to be unveiled at the show. Don't read the whole thing. Just scan it, scrolling on down, and marvel at all the numbers.

*Dishonored 2. Fallout 4. Elder Scrolls VI. Doom 4.* And that's just the Bethesda thread.



Guesswork soon gives way to passion, and we're no longer talking about what we think we'll see, but what we want to

Elsewhere are calls for *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, *Dark Souls III*, *Forza Motorsport Something*, *Gran Turismo Whatever They're Up To* and any number of HD remakes. I am not pointing any fingers here – I want *Street Fighter V* and *God Hand HD* as much as anyone – and I understand why it happens. Last year, for example, it would have been much easier to predict that Nintendo would announce a new *Zelda* or *Star Fox* than unveil an online shooter where you play as a squid. This year, Bethesda is holding a press conference for the first time, so it's only natural that we take a collective look at its

back catalogue and consider the sequels it might be announcing. When the show's over, many will complain about the industry's imagination vacuum, waving their cookie cutters and crying foul at risk aversion.

I was particularly struck by the recent announcements of two very similar games that are being made with two very different philosophies. The new *Guitar Hero* has had a complete makeover, played with a redesigned controller in firstperson in front of a live-action crowd. The new *Rock Band* is simply that, a new *Rock Band*, backward compatible with old instruments and preexisting song packs. The response? Scepticism, apathy and derision for the new, and rapturous adoration for the same old thing. Again, I get it – *Rock Band* grew from a game into a platform, even a pastime, and was rendered obsolete by a generational transition. But still, it's little wonder the industry plays it safe at times. It's because, whatever we say to the contrary, that's precisely what we want to see happen.

A couple of weeks before *Bloodborne*'s release, I read a forum thread in which a concerned poster asked if FromSoftware's latest was just a PS4 tart-up of the *Souls* template or if it contained any "next-gen gameplay". He was laughed out of town – mostly, I think, because he couldn't articulate what it was he was looking for, but that's the whole point. He wanted something he'd never seen before. Isn't that what we all want? Or are we, like the chunk of the UK electorate who told the pollsters one thing then did another in the voting booth, happy in the sanctuary of continuity, unable or afraid to consider what change might look like? E3 will, naturally, yield plenty of sequels, but it's the surprises that make it. And if it disappoints, at least there will be another one along next year, and we won't have to spend a half-decade dealing with the fallout. On second thoughts, maybe I'm not really over the election after all.

Nathan Brown III: The Verbing Of The Noun Super EX Ver. 3.1 2012 Remastered is *Edge*'s deputy editor

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**57 Mad Max**

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**57 Mighty No 9**

360, PC, PS3, PS4, Wii U, Xbox One

**57 Submerged**

Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Xbox One



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# A little too close to home

They say you should be careful what you wish for. On the evidence of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (p38), they're right. A Victorian London setting has long been rumoured for Ubisoft's cash-cow-in-chief, and has always been appealing; our first look at *Syndicate*, however, has proved a little deflating. Perhaps it's because of the bad taste left by *AC: Unity*, or simply that the series template has lost its shine through repeated use. Maybe, in a year that has already seen the release of *The Order: 1886* and *Bloodborne*, this once-novel setting has grown stale.

In fact, we suspect it's born of a different kind of familiarity: we just know the place too well. When Connor Kenway walks down a central street in *Assassin's Creed III's* Revolutionary-era Boston, we simply accept that's what Boston probably looked like at the time. When Niccolo Machiavelli gives Ezio Auditore a walking tour of Rome in *Brotherhood* and explains its political machinations, we take him at his word. Yet give us a game with characters named after slang words – as *Syndicate* does with its gang of Blighters and their leader, Bloody Nora – or where a famous London street has been widened to accommodate vehicle gameplay, and the spell is broken in an instant.

Fortunately, other games in this month's Hype section take us to more alien shores. Take *Triad Wars* (p52), for instance: while Hong Kong residents – and its street-food community in particular – will no doubt feel differently, to us it retains the sense of vivid, believable otherness of its predecessor *Sleeping Dogs*. Meanwhile, Treyarch's *Call Of Duty: Black Ops III* leaps several decades into the future to ensure that it stands out at a time when our real-world armed forces pilot drones with Xbox controllers. *Assassin's Creed* games are about historical tourism, not historical accuracy, but ultimately there's a fine line between artistic licence and – if you'll pardon the vernacular – simply takin' the bladdy piss.

## MOST WANTED

### **Yoshi's Woolly World** Wii U

An all-too-brief look at Yoshi's latest outing suggests a return to form after the sorely disappointing *New Island*. It's almost impossibly beautiful, feels just about right, and some signposting niggles we spotted at E3 last year have been fixed. Review next month.

### **Street Fighter V** PC, PS4

We are assured that other videogames will be playable at E3, but it's going to take something special to prevent us from heading straight to Capcom's booth the moment the doors open on June 16. Bison's just been announced; if Ken's next, we'll be cancelling appointments.

### **The Division** PC, PS4, Xbox One

Another disappointing delay means we won't be playing Massive's enormously promising RPG-shooter until early next year. Sweetening the pill is news that multiplayer specialist Ubisoft Annecy has been brought on board to assist Massive in making that ambitious vision a reality.



H | Y  
P | E

# ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE

An Industrial Revolution may be just what  
Ubisoft's time-hopping series needs

<b>Publisher</b>	Ubisoft
<b>Developer</b>	In-house (Quebec)
<b>Format</b>	PC, PS4, Xbox One
<b>Origin</b>	Canada
<b>Release</b>	October 23 (PS4, Xbox One), Autumn (PC)

**S**ocial concerns once again underpin the unveiling of a new *Assassin's Creed* as an impassioned narrator helps set the scene. This time, it's 1868, right at the fag end of the Industrial Revolution. Our guide highlights the crimes of wealth and power, and firmly plants the Assassins in the camp of the underprivileged. Then he tells us that a quite different revolution is imminent; "A blaze from the ashes of an old brotherhood," in fact. As clearly as this is meant to define the Assassins' new mission — of twin leads teaming up with a city's criminal underworld to overthrow the Templars — it could equally apply to the game as a whole. After last year's glitchy, unfocused *Unity*, the series' stock has never been lower. It needs to either recover the sense of identity it lost when Ezio hung up the hood or find a radically different one.

The next step in the series' globetrotting bid to rediscover what once made it great is Victorian-era London, cobbles well trodden in games of late. It's a potent setting, and the period of rampant technological change seems to be reflected in *Syndicate's* mechanics as well as its urban sprawl. For instance, a load has been taken off that ageing climbing model by a rope launcher, which lets you scale tall buildings in seconds or zipline across gaps. Back on the ground, you can now drive horse-drawn carriages in *GTA*-like fashion.

There's been no change, however, to Ubisoft's enduring penchant for filling the ensemble cast with the celebrities of the era: here, Dickens and Darwin pop up in cutscenes and serve as the basis of the now-obligatory preorder-exclusive missions. Elsewhere, the setting is used to deliver cor-blimey cockney clichés by the barrel load. One gang is called the Blighters; their leader — we promise we're not making this up — is called Bloody Nora.

**So it's not** an entirely reformed character, but *Syndicate's* clearest mea culpa for past mistakes is in introducing a spot of gender balance. Relatively speaking, anyway. Twins Jacob and Evie Frye are both playable and each has their own story. While narrative missions will star one or the other, you can choose who to control when off-mission.

Given the furore over *Unity's* woman trouble — which hit its nadir when that game's creative director said girls were too hard to animate — a female protagonist is a bit of a climb down, but it's still not clear that Ubisoft has really taken the lessons of the backlash to heart. Little is said about Evie in the game's first demo, and the boxart — Jacob front and centre, Evie shunted back and to the side — inspires little confidence that she's an equal partner. The development team also denies that Evie was meant to act as



FROM TOP Creative director Marc-Alexis Côté; senior producer Francois Pelland





Well, this is an odd way to show that you finally have a female protagonist. Evie Frye isn't the series' first, mind – *Liberation's* Aveline De Grandpré takes that honour. But given the fuss last summer, Frye is surely the more high profile





## ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE



Quite who Frye is doffing his hat to all the way up here is anyone's guess, but you can expect to see him taking his hat off on a regular basis. It's the first thing he does when he enters stealth mode



damage control. Having two protagonists, creative director **Marc-Alexis Côté** tells us, “was one of the things that we wanted to do from the beginning. We were thinking, ‘How can we tell the story differently?’ I absolutely wanted to bring a new perspective [to the series], and I think a female protagonist is great for that.” Regardless of the purity of Ubisoft Quebec’s intentions, it’s a sound move, and reading between the lines it seems the team is saving Evie’s cotillion ball for E3.

It’s similarly tempting to see *Syndicate*’s revamped mechanics as a belated attempt to fix its predecessor’s mistakes. While *Unity* protagonist Arno Dorian’s more ‘realistic’ animations made for gummy handling, Jacob’s movements appear to have been designed to serve function over form. His movement here is simplified, fluid and, despite the ‘pre-alpha’ label plastered everywhere, seems to be a vast improvement on Dorian’s. This is particularly heartening when it comes to taking cover: where Dorian struggled with the transition between hiding and walking, the soft snap seen in *Syndicate* streamlines the process and looks to cut down that clunkiness.

**We’re more dubious** about carriage driving; while it’s reasonable for a bulky vehicle to be difficult to handle, chase scenes through the city’s winding streets are painful because of the carriage’s wide turns – doubly so if there are multiple vehicles pursuing you. That’s had a knock-on effect on the design of the world itself, with what should be cramped streets widened to make room for two lanes of traffic, making Lambeth High Street look like the Champs-Élysées. You can climb on top of a cart for a mid-transit punch-up, hide inside one, or use it to run over the opposition. Côté says that “the possibilities are endless”, but that might be overstating things.

Meanwhile, *Syndicate* seems to have hit the rewind button on both combat and stealth, replicating something closer to the series’ foundation. The developers have been quick to focus on how different Jacob’s fighting style is from previous Assassins, with Côté highlighting his “more brash, more brutal” methods and senior producer **Francois Pelland** pointing to Jacob’s use of knuckle dusters and headbutts as evidence of a new,

up-close-and-personal approach. As we see our hero chin a skinhead to the ground, it’s hard to disagree with the latter, but new? It’s immediately reminiscent of the melee seen in *Brotherhood* and *Revelations*, and Jacob’s combo finisher – a gunshot to the noggin – is straight out of Edward Kenway’s playbook.

Stealth in *Syndicate* features even clearer throwbacks: whistling, throwing knives and moving bodies have all returned, while *Syndicate*’s cover system bears a strong resemblance to the one employed in *Black Flag*. Though the top-hat-doffing covert mode does bring with it some novelties – namely environmental traps, such as fires that can be shot with berserk darts to create a poisonous area of effect – these returns to form are what truly stand out. After *Unity*’s imprecise combat, a return to older, more solid foundations feels like a step in the right direction, even if that direction is backwards.

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**“Every year we were saying,  
‘Oh, we’d do it that way.’  
Now we have our chance”**

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This far out, many of *Syndicate*’s different pieces look appealing enough, but then so did *Unity*’s. However, Ubisoft Quebec has the twin benefits of hindsight and having had plenty of time to think about what it wants to achieve. “Over the years with our experience of working on *Brotherhood* and *Revelations*, every year we were saying, ‘Oh, we’d do it *that way*,” Pelland says. “Now we have our chance.”

While the studio has made offshoots for main entries in the past, such as *ACIII*’s *Tyranny Of King Washington* DLC and *Black Flag*’s *Freedom Cry*, this is its first time leading production on a mainline *Assassin’s Creed*. Yet it is far from Ubisoft’s only option. Everyone at the Quebec studio knows that if *Syndicate* is another *Unity*, it’s unlikely to get another chance at the helm. That knowledge has led to the team’s decision to forego multiplayer entirely. “We decided very early on to focus on singleplayer – no multiplayer, no co-op,” Pelland says. “The team are really passionate about doing something great. Everyone understands that this is their shot.” ■



### London posse

As the addition of vehicles suggests, *Syndicate* is set across the biggest world of any *Assassin’s Creed* game to date – some 30 per cent bigger than *Unity*’s Paris, according to the development team. Six distinct districts – Westminster, The Strand, The City, Whitechapel, Southwark and Lambeth – will be included; oddly, Ubisoft Quebec says the Square Mile is roughly the same size as *Brotherhood*’s Rome. Throw in landmarks such as Big Ben, St Paul’s and Waterloo Station and Quebec has an awful lot of work on its plate. Little wonder, then, that eight Ubisoft studios, including regular lead developer Montreal, are helping out, though the credit or blame will ultimately be Quebec’s and Quebec’s alone.



TOP LEFT Ubisoft Quebec has understandably played up the hand-to-hand combat as a point of difference for the game, but while Jacob has no qualms about getting into a good old-fashioned dust-up, Evie prefers to avoid fisticuffs altogether and focus more on stealth. TOP Waterloo Station isn't just there for show: for the first time in an *Assassin's Creed* game, you'll be able to travel around by train. ABOVE In addition to the classic hidden blade and an assortment of melee tools, Jacob also makes heavy use of throwing knives in our demo, both for skewering foes and for triggering environmental kills

ABOVE Carriages also serve the stealth system, with the Fries able to hop inside and out of sight. *Syndicate's* Industrial Revolution hasn't quite been able to cast off *all* the old trappings of the series, however – hay bales will still be scattered about London to break your falls. RIGHT The preponderance of skinheads in announcement media does raise concerns that Quebec's vision of London will lean a little heavily on cliché. Presumably Ubisoft is saving its football hooligan DLC for Gamescom





*Black Ops III's* online multiplayer has nine 'specialist' characters to choose from. Donnie 'Ruin' Walsh is a tough spec-ops warrior whose Cyber Ability, Overdrive, gives him a burst of speed





H | Y  
P | E

# CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III

Liberty, inequality, fraternity: Treyarch's dark future reforms COD around player freedom

<b>Publisher</b>	Activision
<b>Developer</b>	Treyarch
<b>Format</b>	PC, PS4, Xbox One
<b>Origin</b>	US
<b>Release</b>	November 6

The big question at the beginning of development for every *Call Of Duty* must surely be: how different do we make this? Fans of the billion-dollar FPS have been trained to expect certain commonalities: 60fps action that jump-cuts between claustrophobic choke points and explosive cinematics; lightning-paced multiplayer; and a swift, regular rollout of DLC. *COD* is effectively the gamification of ADHD.

Treyarch's *Black Ops* branch has always played with series conventions, at least, putting players in control not of righteous marines, but paranoid CIA operatives fighting deniable battles amid reimagined real-world faceoffs. With *Black Ops III*, the studio is sticking with the theme of complex, below-the-line operations, but shifting ahead to 2060. Now there are two global alliances – The Winslow Accord and the Common Defence Pact – battling to control a world devastated by climate change. But it is also a world rich with new cybernetic and biomechanical technologies.

In this world, players are part of an experimental spec-ops unit investigating a CIA black site in Singapore that's suddenly gone off the grid. You won't play as set characters any more – your fighter is customisable from the start. You'll have access to a suite of hi-tech weapons

(modifiable via a new Gunsmith mode, which lets you add one optic and five attachments to each gun), as well as cyber rigs to offer augmented movement and cyber cores that open up over 40 abilities such as drone hacking. The campaign now has fourplayer co-op, too, with a Tactical Mode view that quickly marks and shares the danger areas spotted by one participant, like a sort of battlefield hive mind. And the big news is that the campaign won't, Treyarch insists, be a linear march through narrow corridors of choreographed action: environments are open, expansive and designed to encourage replay.

**Meanwhile, the multiplayer** features a new set of nine specialist soldiers to choose from, each with their own weapons and abilities, which become available as a power meter rises during each match. Ruin is the tank, and can plant gravity spikes in the ground to deliver devastating area-of-effect damage; Outrider is a stealthy scout whose vision pulse can temporarily locate every enemy on the map. All of these abilities are ranked up during play, then tied in with a global XP system, meaning you have multiple character progression pathways rather than just that solitary march to the next Prestige.

The real question is the extent to which all this reshapes the core of *Call Of Duty*, and ►





## CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III

Treyarch believes it's a lot. In the campaign, for example, the developer claims to have created open, explorable environments that house a layered narrative, meaning you'll only experience a fraction of the story in one playthrough. And that story is going to be open to interpretation, according to campaign director **Jason Blundell**. "You may have one character who you see in a certain way," he tells us, "but then, as you come to believe something else about the story, you may listen to a line of their dialogue again and slap your forehead, thinking, 'Why did I hear it so wrong the first time? Why didn't I understand that nuance?' We expect people to be passionate, to be furious with each other, about what they believe happened, or what the purpose of a level was. We've written it so the facts support multiple interpretations."

**The game also** purports to be a depiction of where lots of military technology is going: the result of speaking to high-level experts and trawling the web for current research. "It's amazing what's publicly available," says studio head **Mark Lamia**. "Just go on the DARPA site and look up cybernetic enhancements. A couple of weeks ago, you had Human Rights Watch debating the autonomous kill orders of robots on the battlefield. Technology is moving way faster than public policy; that's one of the challenges, and these elements are central to our story. These are real issues that humanity is going to have to deal with."

"Think of it philosophically," Blundell says. "It's actually more complicated to write a system that requires a human to give the OK. If you have a weapons system that's programmed to identify an audio signal and turn the turret toward it, you have to write more code to allow human input. There's obviously an ethics question here: if someone innocent is killed, who's to blame? The programmer? It is not a science issue any more; it's a moral issue. We love this stuff. We want people to form opinions. We want to provide a broad landscape so that players can draw their own conclusions."

This sense of freedom of expression extends to player movement, too. With *Black Ops III*, Treyarch has tried to strip out all the obstacles. Sprint is now infinite, you can wall

run, mantling is automatic, and a boost-jump lets you access the rooftops in a leap. There have been the inevitable comparisons with *Titanfall*, but the moves are multidirectional and merge into each other, providing a traversal system that feels like a cross between Treyarch's *Spider-Man* games and a drift-heavy arcade racer. "We still push people into choke points and constrain heights, but we wanted to give players an extended mastery curve, to expand the upper limits of how they learn movement through the map," game director **Dan Bunting** tells us. "We automate a lot of things. We let players concentrate on the combat; everything else is fluid — it sublimates to a primal part of your brain."

Elsewhere the team is promising an overhauled AI system, with a vastly improved nav-mesh to give your opponents a better understanding of the environment, and 20 combat 'mentalities', which range from ultra

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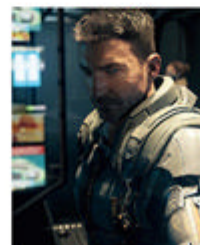
**"We want to provide a broad landscape so that players can draw their own conclusions"**

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defensive to ridiculously gung-ho. "With the greatest reverence and respect for [*Call Of Duty*], sometimes the tactic is just left trigger, right trigger, dead," Blundell says. "With some of our new AI archetypes, that won't be viable. We've also opened up the spaces, so you need much better situational awareness."

There is a lot more to discover about *Black Ops III*: there's the new zombie mode, which has its own XP progression system and story; the score streak system; and how the new unified matchmaking system works (friends will apparently be able to find and compete with or against each other regardless of the mode they're currently playing).

From what's been shown to date, this year's COD seems to be all about space and freedom, building on top of the precision, polish and attitude that are the hallmarks of the series. If certain aspects feel familiar, at least this time you can slide along the floor, blast someone, then rocket onto a wall while arguing with your co-op friends about the meaning of it all. ■



### Safety in numbers

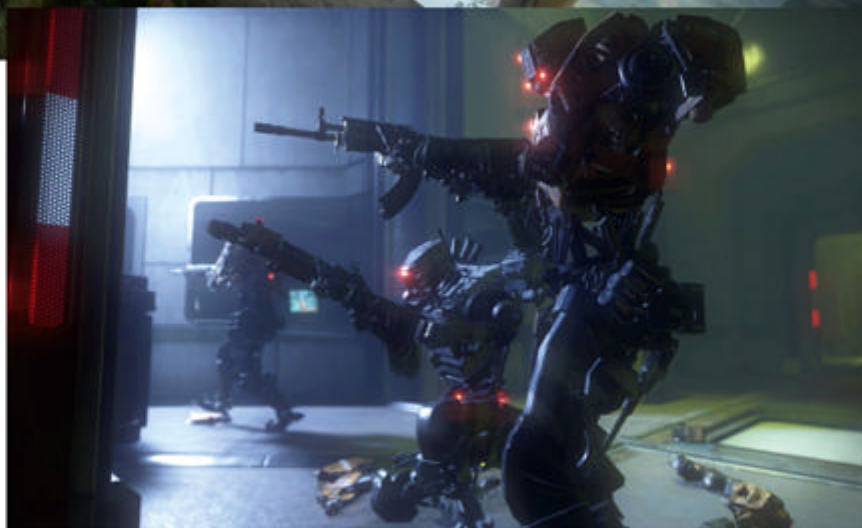
Alongside the new character progression system, Treyarch is adding a Safe House concept. Between missions, teammates will be able to gather together in a bunker to tweak weaponry, spend XP points and customise their bunk with medals and achievements. The studio is also creating a more complex matchmaking system, geared toward facilitating social play. "We're architecting our own social system layer that's going to arc over all three of the modes," Lamia says. "You're going to know where friends are and what they're playing. When we looked at data from *Black Ops II*, we discovered that people were playing multiple game modes in a single session, and we realised we had to make that easier, especially now we have a co-op experience. You shouldn't have to rely on anyone else's tech. We want people to have fun and experience all three modes."



FROM TOP: Jason Blundell, campaign director; studio head Mark Lamia; Dan Bunting, game director



ABOVE Mantling over objects has been made seamless. "Previously you had to stop, jump over and expose yourself to enemy fire," says Bunting. "We wanted you to be able to traverse cover fluidly, and to be able to keep your gun up at all times. It's like a zen state of moving through the map." RIGHT "The enemies make a reasonable, intelligent choice at all times," says Blundell of the game's rebuilt AI systems. "One soldier may have an SMG, but his mentality could be 'I want to keep my distance', 'I want to protect this point' or 'I need to flank'. The problem was reining that system in so the AI agents weren't too good"



TOP LEFT Corridors should be more of a rarity in *Black Ops III*, which features expansive open environments. "It's about being able to jump into a level multiple times," says campaign director Jason Blundell. "We want things to be revealed in a different way each time you play." TOP The Ramses Station mission has you dropping in on a fight between the Egyptian armed forces and a military organisation seeking to control the water flow after the disastrous impact of global climate change



Publisher Activision  
Developer Robomodo,  
Disruptive Games  
Format 360, PS3,  
PS4, Xbox One  
Origin US  
Release 2015



## TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER 5

American wasteland?



Yup, still got it. Within seconds of picking up the pad, we've launched into a perfectly angled wallride, ollied out of the peak of its arc and landed into a tailslide on the ledge at the top, kickflipped straight out of that and landed into another grind. Our thumbs and index fingers cycle instinctively through the movelist – flip, grind, grab, grind – as we scan the periphery for the next stop on our combo line. Long-dormant synapses crackle back into life as we input the up-down command for a manual as a combo safety net, insurance for our hitting terra firma instead of a handrail. It's been too long, but no matter. This muscle memory's never going to fade, and suddenly it feels like an awful lot like 1999 again.

Unfortunately, at the moment at least, it looks a bit like it too. It would be too hasty to judge a game's looks in its alpha state, but even the official screenshots, with their fire-covered rails and hi-res skyboxes, clearly show this is a game that hasn't been built from the ground up for PS4 and Xbox One. While the return of one of gaming's great control systems is cause for celebration, Robomodo seems to be taking the concept of returning to the series' roots a little too literally when it comes to the game's visuals.

The studio is playing things faster and looser when it comes to the actual design. Activision, perhaps mindful of potential accusations that it is dragging a knackered old cash cow out of the stable for a last, desperate milking, insists that this is no nostalgia play like 2012 console download mouthful *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD Remake*. At first, that seems hard to reconcile with this demo, whose level-select screen offers up stages that lean heavily on the look and layout of the first game's Warehouse and *Pro Skater 2*'s School.

The point of difference lies not in the levels themselves, however, but what awaits within them. While the classic score, SKATE and COMBO challenges are naturally present, many of the rest of the items on your to-do

list have been built around *THPS5*'s principal addition to the series' timeworn formula: seamless, drop-in, drop-out multiplayer for up to eight people. Start a combo challenge and you're not only competing against scoring tiers, but seven other people. Mission-critical objects are shared among the group, too, so if an opponent smashes a target by magically firing a dodgeball from the front of their skateboard before you do, it's gone for good.

**Yes. About that.** Quite how it got out of the greenlight meeting is anyone's guess, but *Pro Skater 5* features power-ups (skateboards lit up by flickering flames or electric sparks) and projectiles (those dodgeballs, shot straight in front of you; fireworks, deployed in a shotgun-like spread). It seems to us that there is a very good reason no one has ever made a skateboard deathmatch central to a game before now, but here we all are. Having gone to the trouble of coding up a ball physics system, Robomodo has made use of it elsewhere: one challenge involves pushing two-dozen oversized balls from the school sports hall's pool. Outside is a football and an open goal; around the corner lies a pigskin and two sets of posts. What seems weirdly pointless in singleplayer risks being simply infuriating online: are we really to be knocked out of a million-point combo by some uninvited wag flinging super-sized sports equipment about the place?

Happily, much of this fluff will be avoidable thanks to the skatepark editor, which offers up 250 objects – which may sound slender, perhaps, but the best *Tony Hawk* levels are defined by their layout, not variety – and creations from which can be shared online and accessed from the main menu. While some will surely go heavy on the gimmicks in the main game, others will surely pare away all that; Robomodo might have expended plenty of energy on things players have never asked for, but at least it's giving them the tools to make the game they want. ■



### Create or die

While Tony Hawk's involvement naturally requires that players will be able to select from a roster of pro skaters old and young, you can also create your own from a selection of heads, body types and branded deck designs. Switchable styles map different flips and grabs to D-pad directions, as well as defining special moves – accessed, as in earlier games, by filling a meter by scoring big with long combos. Completing challenges in the main game earns points to spend on your skater's stats, increasing speed, ollie height and stability during grinds and manuals. It's little we haven't seen before, of course, but Octodad in a mech suit and Captain Birdseye with the body of a cheerleader riding boards are surely firsts for the series.



ABOVE Warehouse will be immediately familiar to series veterans. It's not a carbon copy of the original, but many of the old combo lines have been brought across intact.

RIGHT As you might infer from the visuals, this is a cross-generation release. Oddly, the 360 and PS3 versions will only be available in the UK from high-street retailer Game, and also won't have the online functionality of the PS4 and Xbox One versions



TOP LEFT Hawk naturally takes the spotlight in marketing, but he'll be joined by pros such as Nyjah Huston, Chris Cole and, for series fans that weren't already feeling old, Hawk's 22-year-old son, Riley.

TOP As before, your special meter fills as you land tricks and combos, but it's now a time-limited power-up during which all grinds, flips and grabs are special moves, while airborne turning speed is dramatically increased.

ABOVE The final game will feature nine levels – slender by modern standards – with the idea being that user-generated content will pick up the slack. The game's pro skaters will, we're told, hype up the community's best creations on social media



**Publisher** Nintendo  
**Developer**  
Koei Tecmo  
**Format** Wii U  
**Origin** Japan  
**Release** Out now  
(Japan), TBA 2015  
(EU/US)



## PROJECT ZERO V

GamePad ghost-busting invigorates a conventional J-horror

**F**inally, the GamePad assumes the role for which it had always seemed ideally suited. We've been waiting for it to happen since Nintendo acquired co-ownership of Tecmo Koei's horror series, but at last Wii U's idiosyncratic, unwieldy controller can become the idiosyncratic, unwieldy Camera Obscura. It controls as you would hope: you press a button and look through your viewfinder on the GamePad's display, turning to aim at malevolent spirits and tilting when necessary to get more of the ghost in the frame. Then it's a case of maintaining your composure, waiting for the perfect shot, before squeezing the right trigger. A few flashes later, and the exorcism is complete. In practice, of course, it's rarely quite that straightforward.

Still, the advantages to this setup are obvious, and Koei Tecmo fully realises that taking photos has never felt more intuitive.

Beyond waiting for your flash to charge between shots and ensuring you have enough exposures remaining, there are no arbitrary restrictions in place. You simply lift, point and shoot. Now, you can move and aim at once; now, startlingly, there's a dodge button. And therein lies the problem. The *Project Zero* series has thrived on making the process of photography as awkward as possible, finding that sweet spot between frustration and disempowerment. Can it still be scary when spirit photography is no longer such an onerous, anxious struggle?

The most obvious solution is naturally the one for which the developer has plumped: the ghosts are faster, harder, more unpredictable, and more plentiful. And while it pays to remain still – easier said than done when two lurching spectres are converging upon you, and the GamePad's motion sensors are



**TOP** Most ghosts jerk and twitch like spectral marionettes, but it's the ones with an unearthly stillness that are the most unsettling. **ABOVE** Fortune teller Hisoka Kurosawa is related to *Project Zero III* protagonist Rei in a link to past games.

**LEFT** As ever, you're encouraged to let ghosts get close enough that the frame flashes red, allowing you to take multiple shots without recharging. Should they grab hold, a close-up snap should enable you to break free





picking up every tremor — you're actively encouraged to reorient the GamePad, as portrait shots can often capture more weak points at once, delivering additional damage. As a further incentive, there are point bonuses for tilted shots, too. The series' scoring mechanics have always felt like an uneasy fit for what is primarily a horror game, but this time it feels more comfortable. It may not be quite as dramatic a departure from the established formula as *Resident Evil 4*, but there's a palpable shift towards action, prizing intensity over tension.

Which isn't to say *Project Zero* is no longer capable of making you jump, or of getting under your skin. There's a return for the mischievous reach mechanic, introduced in the fourth game by Goichi Suda and reprised in the Wii remake of *Crimson Butterfly*, whereby the camera zooms in slowly every time you crouch to pick up a note or a roll of film. More often than not, there's nothing there. Occasionally, you'll get a jolt as a spectral arm clutches your wrist and you shake the sticks to wriggle free. It's still cheap, and still effective. Likewise the sudden visions of hanging corpses as you enter a room, or the moment where you enter a narrow crawlspace and see ten translucent toes dangling inches above your head.

**The development team** is clearly well-versed in its chosen genre. An early set-piece seems to pay loose homage to both *Resident Evil* and *The Blair Witch Project*'s climactic moments, though it's naturally steeped more

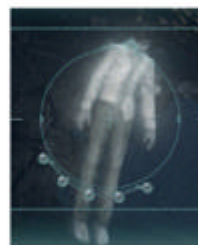
heavily in the traditions of J-horror. The shrine maiden of the Japanese title is a frequent threat, and lank, black hair is a recurring trope. But its central motif is water, traditionally regarded as the optimal environment for spirits to thrive, and whose surfaces function as a distorted reflection of the self. This isn't simply a thematic concern, either: the shallow streams of a woodland hub and the flooded, dilapidated interiors you creep around force you to wade into danger. The wetter you get, the more the encounter rate increases, though drying off isn't always the best option, as dampness doubles as a damage modifier in combat.

Its story, meanwhile, understands that the most potent horror is often rooted in a deep sadness. It explores the concept of excess emotion causing a soul to linger, as each of

### ***Its story understands that the most potent horror is often rooted in a deep sadness***

the three protagonists uses a memento to locate the ghost in question. The forest setting is analogous, perhaps, to Aokigahara, a popular suicide spot in Japan, and thus plays host to a series of graphic deaths. One character sharply draws a knife across her neck, while another ghost is seen jumping off a waterfall, before a truly disquieting set-piece wherein a friend, under the influence of the vengeful maiden, slowly slips a noose around her neck as you race to stop her.

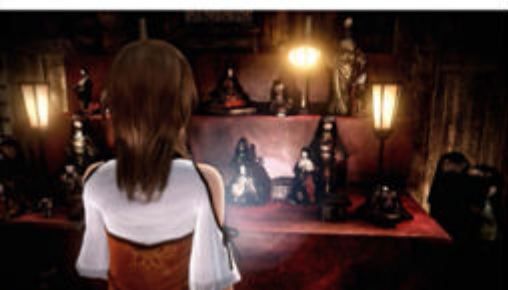
A phantom whose purposeful stride guides you towards the next key item should you lose your way is likely to be a questionable inclusion, but despite attempts to make the game more accessible, *Project Zero V* still has the capacity to discomfit and disturb. That it treads such a familiar path should be sufficient to blunt its scares, yet its pervasively bleak, melancholy atmosphere lingers on. Or maybe it's the uncomfortable sensation as you set the GamePad down that the spirits you've captured on film are somehow trapped within the chunky, plastic housing of your very own Camera Obscura. ■



### **Video nasties**

Two new abilities will factor into your encounters. Damage a ghost and you may cause spirit fragments to appear, which float around your target. The more of these you capture in a single frame, the more damage you'll deal — but wait too long and they'll be absorbed by the ghost, allowing it to recover some health. Upon its defeat, meanwhile, you have a limited window to touch its dematerialising form, whereupon you'll witness a short sequence showing how it died. *Project Zero*'s most barbarous moments are often suggested, but these can be surprisingly cruel and savage, and the fuzzy, grainy filter used here somehow makes the scenes more troubling still — particularly so for a game with Nintendo's logo on the box.

Between trips to the forest you'll have brief spells of downtime, though you'll soon learn you're not alone in this antique shop







## TRINE 3: THE ARTIFACTS OF POWER

Frozenbyte's trio of reluctant heroes head into the horizon



**T**rine 3 breaks with series tradition in a number of surprising ways, but one aspect that has remained comfortably familiar is Frozenbyte's spectrum-defying insistence on finding even more colours to cram into each sequel. The game's stylised fantasy locations are even more detailed than before, presented as a rich haze of fantasy clichés that are rendered with such skill and passion that they somehow feel fresh again.

The prospect of reaching each new vista remains a real draw, but *Trine 3* goes further by allowing you to step into them, too. You're no longer restricted to a narrow horizontal plane, and levels now twist and contort as you switch from traditional side-scrolling to into-the-screen hang-gliding and all manner of gradients in between. It lends its worlds considerably more presence.

"We actually started with traditional 2D *Trine* gameplay, but soon felt that it wouldn't be enough for a third instalment," designer and Frozenbyte CEO **Lauri Hyvärinen** tells us. "But our artists suggested that we consider full 3D, and although we knew it would be a tremendous risk and a lot of work, we decided to go for it. You have to raise the bar to keep getting better."

**Whether that risk** has paid off is still unclear. It's certainly true that the added space creates a more convincing world, and dramatically increases the scope for complex puzzles, but it also puts more pressure on the series' rather flimsy feeling, physics-based platforming. The floaty, imprecise movements of the main characters are exacerbated when they're not kept on the straight and narrow, and it's often very difficult to judge depth when moving into the screen. But there are plenty of positives, too, not least in the way it improves the feel of combat when flailing Pontius's sword amid a gaggle of goblins.

"It's been really challenging but it's also showing a lot of potential now," Hyvärinen explains. "We had to redesign and rewrite

all the gameplay stuff, and many of the technical aspects as well. We're still polishing them and looking into the player experience, and there are lots of little details that we need to get right.

"On the art side it's made it even more challenging to make all the gameplay-related things clear to the player, while still retaining the visual splendour of the previous games. We've always had minor trouble with certain items getting lost in the background, or some background elements being mistaken for gameplay elements, and that's something we have to focus on. Obviously getting the camera right was always going to be difficult, and we're still experimenting with the best angles to show the levels."

There's still time to get everything into shape. And the new ideas that the team have introduced are promising, the best of which are the shorter challenge levels that focus on a single character. They allow the design team to create obstacle courses tailored to a specific set of abilities, in the process smoothing off one of the series' rougher edges: the possibility of cheating your way past areas by spamming them with conjured-up boxes. It's an issue Frozenbyte is keenly aware of.

"The abuse and chaotic mayhem has been part of the intended design from the very first game, but of course we've seen it sometimes go too far and result in too simplistic solutions," Hyvärinen says. "Bypassing a puzzle as such isn't a problem — we encourage exploiting and thinking outside the box — just as long as it's not done in a monotonous one-solution-for-all kind of way."

This thinking has, thankfully, permeated the main campaign, too. "It's still possible to abuse the physics and [characters'] abilities, but we've paid attention to making sure the player needs to think about the puzzles a bit and can't use the same brute-force technique for everything. So, while there's still a lot of freedom, now the different puzzles should require different kinds of tactics." ■

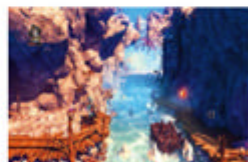


### Trine things out

*Trine 3*'s Early Access build includes an odd addition: a sprawling physics playground in which precarious towers of blocks wait patiently for your influence, and gliders catapult you across the world. "It started out as an internal playground, really," Hyvärinen explains. "It was a lot of fun to try out different concepts and physics ideas, and we thought if we were having fun, then players would too, so we decided to offer it as something special to our Early Access fans. It might even give some ideas to modders. We'll keep updating it continually, and some of the elements might end up in the story levels later on."



*Trine 3* designer  
and Frozenbyte CEO  
**Lauri Hyvärinen**



TOP The game's hit-and-miss platforming makes sections like these frustratingly precarious, although there seems to be some gentle physics nudging to minimise overshoots.

ABOVE Character models are luxuriously detailed and wonderfully animated. Their walk cycles, especially, are pleasingly naturalistic.

MAIN Frozenbyte's artists have long punched above their small studio weight, but *Trine 3* takes things to astonishing new levels of rich and fulsome beauty

TOP As in previous games, the three characters are set up in short prologue levels before being thrust together in the campaign.

RIGHT Infrequent boss encounters return. Here you must target several weak spots, switching between the three characters, in order to fell a hulking armoured creature





**Publisher** Square Enix  
**Developer** United Front  
Games, Square Enix London  
**Format** PC  
**Origin** Canada, UK  
**Release** 2015



## TRIAD WARS

Sleeping Dogs with the good bits mobbed by freemium hooks

**H**ong Kong's gangsters show quite the lack of imagination. Whichever faction they belong to and wherever they set up shop, every one of the city's ne'er-do-wells follows the same interior design rules for their safehouse. There's a lobby with some sofas, chairs and burly badasses; upstairs is an open-plan living area with more loitering goons, and an enforcer kicking his heels on the balcony. They all have the same temple garden, and beyond that lies an industrial estate housing their various criminal rackets: counterfeiting, cock-fighting, hacking and so on. This is a work in progress, of course, and the closed-beta label does much to excuse the copy-pasting of the local set dressing. But it does mean that, in its current form, *Triad Wars* feels less like a battle for supremacy in a city teeming with small-time thugs with big-time dreams, and more like a sequence of

identical fights against a kingpin who moves his operation across town after every defeat.

That aside, United Front's follow-up to *Sleeping Dogs* is surprisingly well fleshed-out – a factor, presumably, in a blanket-coverage NDA being finally lifted on a game that has been playable since late last year. Its systems, progression and economies are in place; Hong Kong throbs with busy roads and streets. On first inspection, it's *Sleeping Dogs* again: that *Arkham* combat system, that ludicrous car handling, those roadside food vendors asking why you don't have a pork bun in your hand. There's an evolution of the previous game's skill trees, too, and many mission designs have been brought over: timed deliveries, on-foot chases and no end of specific skulls to crack. Yet what sets the two apart is an emphasis on systems over story, United Front casting aside a linear narrative in favour of



ABOVE Cars require little encouragement to explode, and a single shot-out tyre will trigger a dramatic slow-motion crash. These little nods to Hong Kong action cinema are less effective in a game structured around a very different sort of power to its predecessor

Melee and ranged loadouts can be changed in the pause menu and switched between with the D-pad, providing you own them already. Our preferred tactic is to charge at a group of gunmen with a machete, then take a pistol from the first of them to fall





LEFT One mission type has you chase down a target on foot, with strict instructions not to kill him. We duly give chase and, when he stops by a mob, focus our blows on him. A popup reminds us to keep him alive. Wait, have we been punching people to death all this time?



TOP LEFT Your starting whip is nothing like this – you'll spend your first hours back in Hong Kong behind the wheel of a minivan with suspect brakes. Carjacking works as before, thankfully, and Hong Kong's streets are now riddled with sports cars.

ABOVE As in *Sleeping Dogs*, there's a recognition of the fact driving and shooting at the same time is no fun at all. If you need to shoot on the move, you'll do so from the passenger seat, with an AI accomplice at the wheel

The cover system here is the same as in *Sleeping Dogs*, which is to say it's not very good. Your avatar happily covers behind a table that leaves his head and much of his body exposed, but bumps haplessly into a wheelie bin that would provide full cover

resource gathering and base building. Rather than let players see life through the eyes of an undercover cop, *Triad Wars* has you whale on faces and click on icons in the time-honoured tradition of making various numbers go up.

**Only three** of them really matter, though. There's Face, the XP equivalent brought over from *Sleeping Dogs*, which here not only drives the levelling progression but is also presented as a cumulative lifetime total as a measure of your thuggery. There's the traditional stack of cash, which makes you feel like you're doing quite well for yourself until you remember that there are 12 Hong Kong dollars to the pound. Finally, borrowed from every freemium game ever made, is a premium currency. Those digital dollars, you see, are only used to fund the development of your empire, spent on upgrades to your rackets, production lines and security. For everything else, you'll need gold, available in-game at a miserly rate or from the store in bundles from \$5 up to \$99.99, and those are US dollars, not Hong Kong's. Tired of that starter hairdo? A pompadour will set you back roughly \$4

worth of gold. If you're after a new vehicle, expect to pay many times more. Admittedly, it's industry standard practice now, but never has it so brazenly been the focal point of an open-world game made, it seems, on a not unreasonable budget.

You try your best to ignore it. You take down the rival half-dozen thugs in the region, perhaps buying intel on their other operations beforehand, since taking these sidelines out before assaulting a compound gives you a little more time before the cops turn up. In between these raids, as *United Front* styles them, you'll collect the takings from your various rackets via the pause menu, set some

## Most troubling of all is the absence of the one thing that *Sleeping Dogs* really got right

more timers running, maybe upgrade a couple of them to improve yields. New opportunities arrive as you level up – an Export mission requires that you see off pursuers from the passenger seat of a delivery van using only a pistol, say – but the balance is tilted too far towards repetition, at least at the moment.

Most troubling of all is the absence of the one thing *Sleeping Dogs* really got right. While *Triad Wars* retains the core of its ancestor's combat system, it has none of the variety and little of the finesse. There are combos, power moves, grabs and environmental finishers, but what's available at the start is the same after ten hours. It makes it abundantly clear that the focus is on growing your wealth, rather than your power; that this is a game about making numbers go up first, and people fall over a distant second. Perhaps we're being a little hard, but the work that's gone into refining the structure and economy suggests that *United Front* is happy with everything else. It's hard to see players feeling the same way without one hell of an overhaul. ■



## Out of favour

Your meagre stock of gold can also be used to buy Favours, single-use consumables that take the form of playing cards, bought in packs and unveiled one at a time in a nod to *Hearthstone* and FIFA's *Ultimate Team* cash cow. We can't see *Triad Wars*' take on this most modern of monetisation hooks being quite so popular, however: often what Favours offer is so mundane as to make you reassess the meaning of the word 'perk'. Our favourite, if you can call it that, offered to automatically collect the takings from our various rackets for a period of eight hours, a reflection of a studio optimistically assuming that its playerbase will only turn away from its game to go to sleep.





**Publisher/**  
**developer** Kobojo  
**Format** Android,  
 iOS, Vita  
**Origin** France,  
 Japan, UK  
**Release** 2015



## ZODIAC

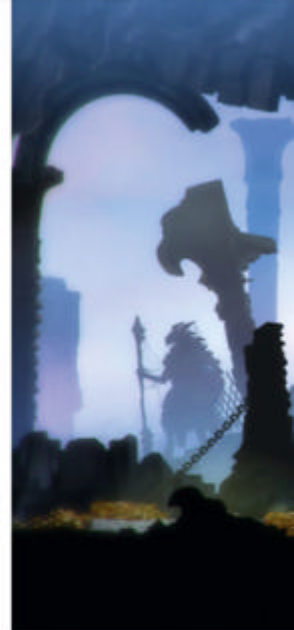
The JRPG stars align for this painterly free-to-play fantasy

**W**e don't typically associate Scotland with roleplaying games. Yes, the capital boasts a proud development lineage, what with playing home to Rockstar North and the cultural and sales phenomenon that is *GTA*. But the coastal city of Dundee acting as a crucial base for a JRPG/MMOG handheld hybrid? That's new.

Yet French developer Kobojo recently established a tight clutch of 24 coders and artists in the city, an expansion made to help it aggressively pursue high-end production values. That new team is now hard at work on a persistent online RPG of quite daunting scope, aiming for a world the size of a *Final Fantasy* for players to quest together in. Currently known by the working title *Zodiac*, it draws on steampunk and anime influences to inform its art direction, then tethers it to traditional Japanese fantasy in a free-to-play

adventure that's destined for Vita, tablets and smartphones, planned to be ready for general consumption by the end of this year.

Dundee might not be renowned for its RPGs, but the Japanese talent that Kobojo has brought on most certainly is. Sound design is being handled by Basiscape, a Tokyo company helmed by Hitoshi Sakimoto, the celebrated composer of *Final Fantasy Tactics* and *Vagrant Story*. Also on the payroll is Kazushige Nojima, the writer responsible for penning scripts and scenarios on over ten *Final Fantasy* games. "For guys who are industry legends, they're very normal," Kobojo president **Mario Rizzo** tells us. "We first met [Nojima] in an Italian restaurant in Japan and just drank beer and talked about professional wrestling. By the end of that meal, he said he'd like to work with us." Considering he is still committed to conjuring scenarios for *Final Fantasy XV*, it



**ABOVE** The topography fluctuates significantly during our hands-on. Starting with a leisurely glide over arid wastelands, the world transitions from deserts to underground caverns as our griffin passes through floating portals.

**LEFT** Combat currently feels passive. Rather than opt for the timing-based cadence of a *South Park: The Stick Of Truth*, *Zodiac* asks you to wait patiently to be swatted by Gothic monstrosities





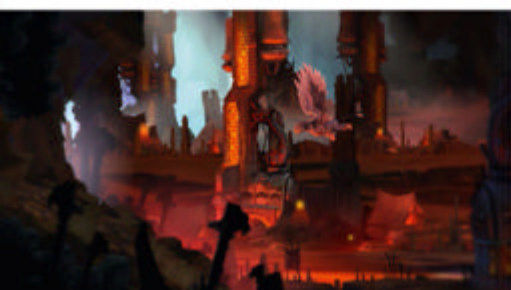
Mario Rizzo, president and CEO of Kobojo

says much of *Zodiac's* potential that the writer is willing to split his focus across two titles of such radically different stature.

Rizzo cites the game's fierce ambition and his studio's artistry as the primary factors that piqued Nojima's interest, though both *Final Fantasy* alums had their concerns. Indeed, there's a considerable amount riding on *Zodiac* rising above the stigma of its F2P status. "These guys are so well known in the industry that part of the deal was, 'If we don't say it's OK, it's not OK,'" Rizzo says. "Meaning, 'You can't release something that's going to damage our reputation.'" No pressure, then.

**Securing the services** of key *Final Fantasy* creative talents is doubtless a bold statement of intent, but *Zodiac* still has a way to go before it can be said to live up to the seminal JRPG series. First impressions after a hands-on with an early offline iPad version are that this is a safe take on the formula, albeit a searingly pretty one. Perhaps that will change when you're battling alongside other players, and who knows what surprises await in the promised roster of 12 character classes, each with different godly powers at their disposal. Still, there's little evidence of divine intervention in the vanilla turn-based combat we try, although it doesn't help that the UI iconography is still being ironed out. As such, the assortment of elemental attacks and HP potions your three-strong band of leather-clad adventurers call upon are mixed into a cauldron of vague violence, punctuated by the odd, accidental healing interlude.

Rizzo claims *Zodiac* steers away from sterile MMOG storytelling thanks to Nojima's intimate, "adult" script. "It's more like a co-op game where you can ride along with a friend, so you can make a very personal story," Rizzo explains



*Zodiac's* detailed art seems a natural fit for larger screens, though the talks between Kobojo and Sony to bring the game to PS4 aren't finalised. "We would like to do it," Rizzo admits. "[Sony] wants it on both platforms"



But there's no question that, if nothing else, the foes you will face are gorgeously ghastly. We clap eyes on creaking mechanical crow monstrosities that brandish electrified staves, encounter majestic bipedal felines whose manes somehow elegantly blend into the craggy spines of giant armadillos, happen upon a deliciously odd race of adorable purple simian ninjas. At least Nojima will have a packed bestiary around which to craft his combat scenarios.

Indeed, a vast library of backstory and battle scripts has already been written, according to Rizzo. "The depth of the characters within the story is huge," he says. "When we had the initial meeting with [Nojima], we had a scenario, but it wasn't a high-level one; it was close to a 20-page outline. Three or four months later, he came back with 200. He works that way because

## Nojima will have a packed bestiary around which to craft his combat scenarios

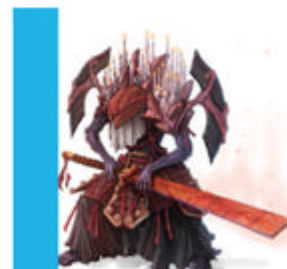
his benchmark is always *Final Fantasy* or *Kingdom Hearts*. We told him we wanted something the size of *Final Fantasy*. But it's a case of being careful what you wish for with him, because then you get something the size of *Final Fantasy*."

While Kobojo clearly has sizeable logistical challenges ahead — to name just one, creating enough game to carry off Nojima's volumes of text — there are also stern questions to be asked. As a free-to-play game, how Kobojo handles those microtransactions will be key; it is not just a matter of keeping Nojima and Hashimoto on side, but also winning over and then keeping fickle App Store customers and sceptical Vita owners. The company's current plan is to charge for high-end weapons and consumables — non-vital items that won't block the full-fat experience for those unwilling to fork out. How the game walks this most perilous of tightropes will be crucial. Yet with Nojima and Sakimoto in its corner, Kobojo feels there's no challenge ahead that it can't overcome. ■



## Fight or flight

The exploration side of the adventure takes the form of 2D flying sections with the as-yet-unnamed protagonist astride their pet griffin. Steering the creature through the air is elegant enough, touch controls letting you dictate the beast's flight path with simple drags of a finger. These sections also show off *Zodiac's* eclectic land, a world of watercolour-painted beauty reminiscent of *Child Of Light*. Rizzo, however, looks to Japan, citing *Final Fantasy XII* as the main inspiration behind the design philosophy. "With *XII*, its characters were a hybrid of sci-fi and fantasy. That made it more approachable to me. We wanted *Zodiac* to feel more western with those steampunk elements."







ROUNDUP

## JUST CAUSE 3

**Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Avalanche Studios **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Sweden, US **Release** 2015



Rico Rodriguez has always had a cavalier attitude to others' property, less secret agent than unstoppable wrecking ball as he topples generalissimos one gas cylinder tethered to a Lamborghini at a time. And now he's gained extra grapple lines and a wingsuit to reduce the wait between seeing a plane and tossing the pilot out of the cockpit, it seems unlikely that's going to change. Rather, the focus of this sequel is on even more dynamic destruction and fluid movement, with a tightened-up grappling hook, smoother climbing, and vehicles tuned by ex-Burnout staffers. But it's the freedom of that wingsuit that most entices, zipping from one crumbling symbol of dictatorial rule to the next over the sun-dappled fields of the Republic of Medici.

## FIVE NIGHTS AT FREDDY'S 4: THE FINAL CHAPTER

**Publisher/developer** Scott Cawthon **Format** PC, others TBC **Origin** US **Release** October 31



His involvement in a Hollywood movie based on this series of rapidly developed security video nasties hasn't stopped Scott Cawthon teasing its last instalment. The heart-pounding formula is well established: as a night watchman confined to a single room in a building full of demonic animatronics, you must survive by juggling camera feeds, managing power and distracting the wind-up merchants that lumber around you. But with an atypical amount of time before its Halloween release – the first two sequels were made in three and four months respectively – we'd bet on Cawthon devising a few twisted twists to send off the threadbare Freddy.

## MARIO MAKER

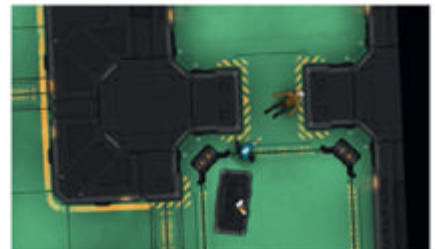
**Publisher/developer** Nintendo **Format** Wii U **Origin** Japan **Release** September



GameCenter CX saw Shigeru Miyamoto face his own creation in a gauntlet laid down by Shinya Arino and made with the Wii U level-creation toolkit. What it showed best was that the ability to change the rules can fox even seasoned players, Miyamoto struggling to overcome a run of Thwomps as he charged after a gigantic red shell before it rebounded and killed him. Several one-more-goes later, the creator nailed it.

## HEAT SIGNATURE

**Publisher/developer** Heat Signature Team **Format** PC, others TBC **Origin** UK **Release** TBC



It's no longer fair to say Tom 'Gunpoint' Francis is only offering glimpses of his space stealth roguelike, since he's shown its entire universe via galactic-level zooming. Inside lie ships full of guards to outsmart, loot to plunder and systems to tinker with, all in an area he estimates as needing 121 trillion pixels.

## DISNEY INFINITY 3.0

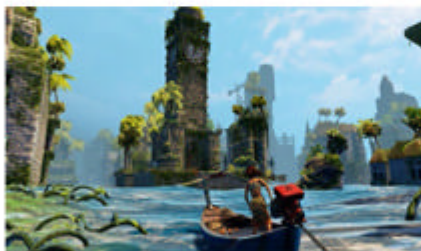
**Publisher** Disney Interactive **Developer** Avalanche **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Wii U, Xbox One **Origin** Various **Release** 2015



The Force is unleashed on Disney's cash cow as it upgrades again. Three playsets will tap the galaxy far, far away: Ninja Theory's is set in the prequel years, Studio Gobo's tracks Luke and Leia across the original trilogy, and a Force Awakens set is confirmed. Shareholders must have a good feeling about this.

## SUBMERGED

**Publisher/developer** Uppercut Games **Format** Android, iOS, PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Australia **Release** 2015



Following in the lone footprint trail of *Everybody's Gone To The Rapture*, Uppercut's apocalypse is an atypically cosy one, if rather soggy. Waves lap at rusting Ferris wheels and overgrown masonry as Miku pilots her boat about this half-waterlogged cityscape, seeking supplies for her wounded brother and answers about this catastrophe. As she does, she'll be free of the pressures of fail states and combat.

## MAD MAX

**Publisher** Warner Bros **Developer** Avalanche **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Sweden, US **Release** September 1 (NA), 4 (EU)



Your car is a lifeline in the wasteland, road wars a brutal complement to bouts of *Batman*-esque bare-knuckle brawling. To give you the edge, acquired gear might allow you to spec your ride with rebar-spiked wheels or a plough fender, but you'll need to balance hitting power with handling.

## MIGHTY NO 9

**Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** Comcept **Format** 360, PC, PS3, PS4, Wii U, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** Sept 15 (EU), 18 (UK)



Another delay and more cash for Comcept's overfunded *Mega Man* successor as Inafune and co sign on with Deep Silver. It means a boxed release, which includes the Ray DLC; that same DLC free for backers; plus extra polish. But *Mighty No 9* will now have to gleam to appease some none-too-happy backers.

## HELLBLADE

**Publisher/developer** Ninja Theory **Format** PS4 **Origin** UK **Release** TBC



Ninja Theory's turn towards self-publishing could have meant cutting back on cinematic drama and attention to detail. Instead, overcoming its limitations has required creative solutions, such as plant-pot-based LED lighting tech to generate normal maps, or hanging Ikea wardrobe posts in a meeting room to hold performance-capture cams. It's a dedication to quality that does much to justify the studio's desire to find a path between indie and triple-A development.

## DIRT RALLY

**Publisher/developer** Codemasters **Format** PC **Origin** UK **Release** Out now (Early Access)



*Colin McRae Rally* felt right. The way the car slipped over the loose-gravel-textured polygons was satisfying and exciting. *Dirt Rally* achieves a similar feat, but rather than rely on clever artifice, Codemasters' latest effort uses a complex simulation of car parts and road-surface physics that feels a world away from the chuckable, arcadey *Dirts* of late. Even *Dirt 3* feels soft in comparison. The first Early Access build features 36 stages split between Wales, Monaco and Greece; 17 dentable cars drawn from between the '60s and 2014; and, perhaps best of all, a co-driver who sounds a little harried as he reels off the pace notes.



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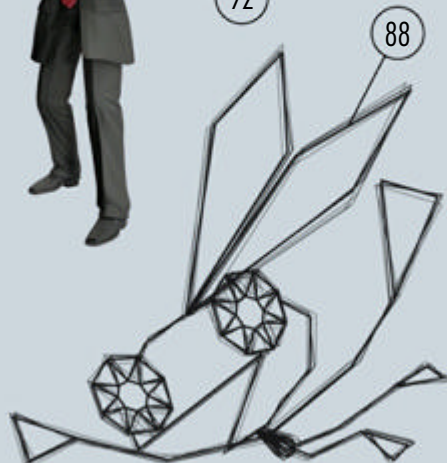
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# POST VETAI

Eidos Montreal's answer to the six-million-dollar question: can the studio rebuild its flawed Adam Jensen?

By **BEN MAXWELL**

**Game** *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*  
**Publisher** Square Enix  
**Developer** Eidos Montreal  
**Origin** Canada  
**Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One  
**Release** TBC



*Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* is the title of the sequel to 2011's *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, but it's also an unfortunately neat summing up of the effect of the binary, potentially progress-stomping bottleneck that was its forebear's first boss. Anyone who opted for an aggressive, well-armed Adam Jensen had little trouble with killing machine Barrett, but pacifists who made their way to the same point using vents and shadows were forced into a situation that many couldn't overcome. It was hardly in keeping with the series' spirit of freeform decision making and self expression. Eidos Montreal addressed the cracks in the *Director's Cut* edition, bolting on new ways to kill bosses, but *Mankind Divided* is the studio's chance to redress the balance at a fundamental level – something the team has apparently wanted to do since even before *Human Revolution* shipped.

"We weren't consistent on *Human Revolution* and we knew it," executive game director **Jean-François Dugas** admits. "Production issues prevented us from doing [the boss fights] the way we wanted, so my take was, 'You know what? We know we're not consistent, we're not going to pull it off how we'd like, but at least let's make them entertaining and not frustrating.' It's just that we failed at the frustrating part of the equation [laughs]. Those who were more into combat thought the bosses were really interesting, and it was easy. But a lot of players were playing stealth... Oh my God, that was a slap in the face. We fixed it on the *Director's Cut* to a certain degree, but because the cutscenes were already made, the bosses *had* to die, so we were still forcing you to do that."

It's telling that the only boss encounter we see during our time with *Mankind Divided* is resolved not with a shotgun blast or a cloud of shrapnel from an exploding barrel, but deft negotiation. It's a different climate. The golden age of augmented individuals has soured in the tragic shadow of *Human Revolution*'s Panchaea massacre – augs are now viewed with distrust by unaltered humans and segregated in what the team describes as a "mechanical apartheid". Dr Talos Rucker is the leader of the Augmented Rights Coalition (ARC), a collective of activists whose claims of belonging to a peaceful protest organisation are eroded by the few rotten apples who carry out terrorist acts in the ARC name. He must be convinced to peacefully leave the relative safety of ▶



## "IT'S IMPORTANT THAT YOU CAN DECIDE TO NOT KILL ANYONE, BUT STILL BE A COMBAT PLAYER – THAT FLEXIBILITY SHOULD BE EMBRACED"

his ghetto for questioning. Our available tactics fall under the headings of Justify, Patronise and Turn Tables as we try to steer him from the presumption that leaving willingly will weaken his cause and risk his life.

*Human Revolution* featured so-called 'social boss fights' as well, of course, but Eidos is doing more to bed them into the world this time around. Make your way through Golem City – the ghetto where Rucker resides – by knocking heads and he'll be much less likely to cooperate than if you sneak to him and minimise collateral damage. It's the polar opposite of the encounter that bifurcated *Human Revolution*.

"[This time,] we're a game that you can play stealthily, or for combat; you can kill, or you can decide not to kill. You can sometimes avoid obstacles altogether, because there might be other opportunities to overcome these things," Dugas says. "And we want to make sure our boss fights fully respect those rules from day one."

Dugas's claims are backed up by the multitude of options once our conversation with Rucker ends, since – spoiler alert – his fears of assassination are realised all too promptly. We could face the armed forces sent here by corrupt powers, who are now cutting through the office door; we could explore a room-sized safe using the key Rucker handed over before his demise; we could escape out of the window and sneak through a large greenhouse area; or perhaps clambering up through a hole in the ceiling and crawling to safety is the best option.

"We don't always succeed, and sometimes we're inconsistent, because making these games is extremely costly

and it takes time," Dugas admits. "But we're trying to push that limit as far as we can to make sure that players can experiment with the system as much as they want, and are rewarded for that. We want to provide players with the tools to tell their own stories within ours."

Striking that balance successfully relies on none of those tools being blunted, however, which means Eidos has had to address *Human Revolution*'s greatest irony: even though players were forced into combat situations, skirmishes were the weakest part of the game. That will explain the spirited reveal, then.

"When you see the trailer, it's a bit more action-packed than what we did for *Human Revolution*, and some people out there started to think, 'Oh my God, this game is going to be more about action.' That's not true – it's going to be the same recipe as it was with *Human Revolution*," Dugas explains. "I think *Human Revolution* was doing a lot of that stuff in a good way, but in places we fell short of carrying it through as we should have. For this game, we're trying to see it through."

To that end, the studio isn't trying to reinvent how Jensen approaches stealth – although you have many more options, including performing takedowns from cover, moving forward to cover rather than just side to side, and even remote hacking – but has considerably built up his less diplomatic recourses. Crucially, most additions benefit both approaches.

These upgrades are split into active and consumable augmentations. The former are permanent, such as the ability to see a representation of the last location in which you were spotted, or be more persuasive in conversations. The latter are



ABOVE Executive director Jean-François Dugas.  
BELOW *Mankind Divided*'s locales blend in a greater number of organic elements in order to create more of a contrast with the tech



temporary, sapping power from an energy meter and assignable in groups of three, swapped in and out using a radial menu. The most strikingly combat-oriented is the Titan aug, a triangulated shield overlay that gives you protection from enemy bullets for its short duration. It's clearly designed to break the deadlock of being discovered and then trapped in cover – a common problem in *Human Revolution* – and one that allows for more domineering playstyles. In a brilliant touch, sound becomes muffled when the Titan aug is activated, mentally distancing you from the dangers of the battlefield and heightening your sense of power until the energy meter runs out.

**The cloaking device** is a more flexible tool, and provides complete invisibility (at least from unmodded human enemies), which is particularly useful if you have a lot of open ground to cross. It's even more effective in combination with the Icarus Dash, which lets you leap forward from cover or even through the air. The last-known-position aug provides a wonderfully readable way of luring people to their doom (or to be mugged of their consciousness). Then there's X-ray vision, which allows you to see and tag rivals – highlighted in red – through doors and walls, establishing numbers and patrol routes before choosing your entry point. Among the various ranged tools at your disposal are Nanoblades, which allow Jensen to quickly and silently take down enemies from a distance, as well as the aforementioned remote hacking. The latter goes hand-in-hand with *Mankind Divided*'s newly expanded hacking minigame, building on the previous game's version with more software to deploy, booby traps and more complex networks.

But Eidos Montreal isn't only focusing on the two extremes of stealth and combat. The studio has also thought hard about the grey areas in between – a fitting parallel to the ethical meanderings of the series' themes. "We've always said we wanted you to be able to choose whether to kill everyone or kill no one, but the nonlethal tools we gave you in *Human Revolution* were... Basically, if you weren't stealthy, you were kind of fucked," Dugas says. "They weren't quick weapons that could take out several enemies at once. This time, it is important that you can decide to not kill anyone, but still be a combat player – that kind of flexibility should be embraced."

All of this is tied together by a redesigned control scheme that's being built to facilitate fluid play, both in terms of your ability to switch between augmentations and the way that you move through the world. The studio is still finessing this – even the radial menu in the build we see isn't final – but it's obvious from the outset that the game's flow is considerably improved over *Human Revolution*: takedown animations don't end with a clunky screen fade before awkwardly resetting you, and moving between different playstyles is now smooth. This is a *Deus Ex* where choice doesn't simply mean throwing your lot in with a single path. *Mankind Divided* encourages you to take risks by dropping its predecessor's punitive response to plans gone awry, its bolstered options all the more meaningful as you use them to improvise a way through unforeseen situations. ▶



## JENSEN'S BUTTONS

A couple of years on from *Human Revolution*, Jensen now works for a corporately funded international task force hunting down augmented villains. One perk is the uniform, a new trench coat designed in collaboration with real-world clothing brand Acronym. "They make these really hi-tech, super-stylish clothes and they're becoming well known," says executive art director **Jonathan Jacques-Belletête**. "They didn't know about *Deus Ex*, but we sent them all the material they needed, including the games. They really did their homework and fell in love with our stuff and said, 'You know what, this is like the game interpretation of the garments we do.' So it's a real partnership."





## FULL METAL JACKET

While there is a societal schism in the wake of the Panchaea incident, the animosity aimed at augmented humans hasn't stopped their opponents adopting (admittedly less permanent) enhancements of their own. In order to corral and control the augs, corporate soldiers need comparable strength and abilities. Exosuits and advanced armour play a big part in outfitting the strictly flesh-and-blood forces, but many will also have access to the same kind of temporary augmentations you do, including Titan shields, cloaking devices and the Icarus Dash.

Officially, Jensen is on the same side as these heavy-footed 'peacekeepers', but he's motivated by his ongoing hunt for the mysterious Illuminati

from the prior game. He's also secretly working with the Juggernaut Collective, a group of hackers, augs and double agents. The factions' escalating tech war has given the team plenty of latitude to consider the minutiae of weapon and armour designs. "The idea was to make things a little more functional," Jacques-Belletête says. "It's funny, the years pass and when I look back at the armour from *Human Revolution*, it has a plain, almost cartoony sci-fi look to it, and doesn't look very credible any more. We've become better at making these things, so we wanted to make it look more militarily contemporary. It's more functional, but in the same spirit."





Golem City's repurposed building blocks form an imposing fortress in which ostracised augs can live out their days. But its dark corners and shady markets also provide a breeding ground for less accepting elements to plot revenge

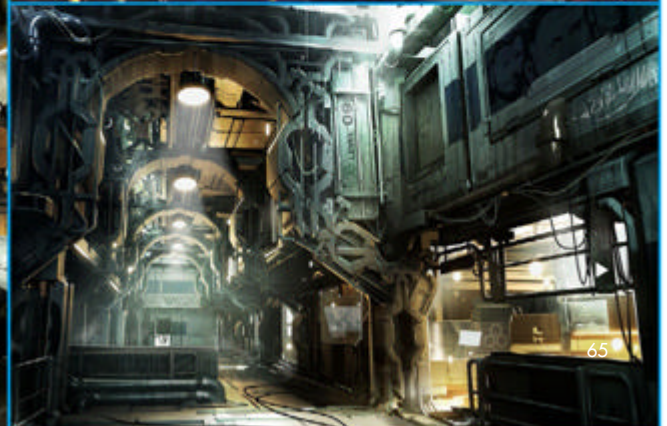
## POST METAL



While sunshine occasionally penetrated the gloom in *Human Revolution*, *Mankind Divided* is going to have a much greater variety of times of day. The hour will change as you revisit places, too, allowing you to see them in a new light



Height is a key element of *Mankind Divided's* environments, providing both a greater sense of scale and the opportunity for more routes through levels. The team has been inspired by *Children Of Men's* subtle blending of sci-fi with the everyday as much as the neon murk of *Blade Runner*



EDGE





awn, Eidos Montreal's new engine, is what makes all of this possible. Whereas Square Enix's Crystal engine strained under the weight of *Human Revolution's* ambitious design and visuals, Dawn – itself a heavily modified version of io-Interactive's Glacier 2 – appears to be a much better fit for *Mankind Divided's* extravagances. "I can say this now because *Human Revolution* is in the past, but tech-wise it wasn't the most advanced game, obviously," executive art director Jonathan Jacques-Belletête tells us. "But the visuals were really lauded. It's very rare in our industry to have a game that isn't built on the most advanced tech but still wins best visual and art direction awards, and I think a lot of that was based on its sophistication. I think that shows where the industry is going – it's not just about the tech side of visuals any more, but the ideas behind them. We're really proud as a studio that we had so much praise for the visuals of *Human Revolution*, even though the tech wasn't quite there. But this time around, [our engine is] all the way up there with the big guys."

The difference is immediately obvious. Although Eidos isn't yet ready to show the game's new Prague location, the more familiar cyberpunk aesthetics of the Golem City ghetto are dialed up to dramatic new levels. Cathedral-like spaces built from recycled modular city components are illuminated by the kind of lighting installations that acted as something of a

Rucker, the leader of ARC, is beautifully animated throughout our conversation with him, exhibiting subtle expressions and flourishes as he sets out his concerns



## "IT WAS REALLY COLD AS A COMBAT EXPERIENCE. THIS TIME, WE WANT TO MAKE IT WARMER, RICHER, AND MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE BULLETS ARE HITTING THE ENVIRONMENTS"

trademark for the previous game. These collisions of tech and concrete are part calculated industrial arrangement, part flustered organic altar, and built to accommodate *Mankind Divided*'s new infatuation with levels that expand vertically as much as they do laterally. On a more intimate scale, every surface is scattered with detritus and discarded components, while water pools on dimpled metal floors. Tangled wiring hangs loosely from unseen fittings up above, powering a messy shock of strip lights and lamp shades. It's a world that, despite being built of areas roughly equivalent in size to those of *Human Revolution*, entirely sidesteps its predecessor's sense of claustrophobia. *Mankind Divided*'s spaces feel lived in and usable, not simply engineered for players.

"There are ratios to the spaces we live in and there are reasons for that," Jacques-Belletête explains. "But it's easy to forget that [when making a] videogame. In a firstperson game, there are a lot of gameplay variables that actually impair those ratios – the wide-angle lens, the wider doors – and it kind of fucks up the credibility of videogame spaces. And that's fine: our job is to make a game. But even in the stuff that isn't impaired by the gameplay, we have a tendency to get lost. For example, there were a lot of apartments in *Human Revolution*, and the same is true of *Mankind Divided*. But the first attempts our level designers did looked very game-y. The size of the apartments, the layout... it was as if they'd never lived in apartments, but resided in great castles or *Quake II* arenas. So something as simple as an apartment, which is a secondary part of a *Deus Ex* game, we had to really make sure it was properly done, which meant a lot of reworks. And that goes for *everything*."

**This is evident** in the aesthetic that binds the elements of this nearfuture world together, while at the same time illustrating the uneasy rift that has severed society. *Human Revolution*'s cyber-Renaissance fashion and architecture remain, along with its characteristic black-and-gold palette, but it now has a counterpoint in the blue/grey corporate feudalism style that represents the powerful anti-augmentation lobby. The former riffs on the elaborate detailing and excesses of the Renaissance era, while the latter exudes the purposeful, utilitarian lines of Middle Ages armour and fortresses. The contrast is stark, but not heavy-handed, and at the locus of this social malaise is Adam Jensen, tugged on from all sides by his professional loyalties, personal demons and the parts of his anatomy he didn't get to pick from a catalogue. But neither this grounding in reality – whether it's referencing modern spaces or costume dress – nor access to a powerful new graphics engine mean that the team is straying towards visual realism.

"In our industry, there's this whole quest for photorealism," Jacques-Belletête says. "These crazy maps and replicating each little atom of reality in real time. That's amazing, but it becomes just that: a snapshot of reality. There's no message in that; just plainly recreating reality has a lot of great technicalities to it,

but it has no art. Everything about *Crysis* – the tech, how they create their photorealistic visuals – is amazing. But it doesn't say much other than, 'Hey, look at how crazily like the real ones these leaves look!' You probably wouldn't frame an image [of *Crysis*] and put it in your living room. It doesn't have that artistic punch.

"We've always wanted to illustrate more than simulate. Now there's still a big spectrum in that, and it doesn't mean that our games have to look like *Team Fortress* – although I think that's one of the most artistically well-controlled games in our industry – but we've always said that *Deus Ex* is a bit more like a graphic novel."

*Mankind Divided* hasn't lost any of its predecessor's artistic punch in the leap to new tech, and as you can see from the images on these pages, all that extra grunt has been channelled into ramping up the stylisation of Eidos Montreal's visual direction. But one thing that graphic novels communicate that *Human Revolution* absolutely didn't is dynamism. The game might have had its fair share of clutter, but it was all nailed down. One of Eidos Montreal's big focuses for *Mankind Divided* is to give the player much more feedback, and that means a world and spaces that react to your presence.

"When you were shooting [in *Human Revolution*], environments felt like they were rigid and clinical – not necessarily reacting much to what was going on onscreen," Dugas says. "You kill those five or six guys and that was pretty much it – it was really cold as a combat experience. This time, we want to make it warmer, richer, and to make you feel like the bullets are hitting the environments and having an impact. [We want to] create a chaotic, emotional experience for the gun battles."

Don't expect fully destructible levels, however – this is more about busily populated environments that will erupt into a mess of shrapnel and shredded ring binders once shots are exchanged. And that reactive, communicative design extends to the game's audio as well. Gun sounds have been beefed up (weapons can now fire standard, armour-piercing and EMP rounds), and enemy barks are more numerous and instructive, but it's the music – composed once again by Michael McCann – that represents the most arresting audio proposition.

*Human Revolution* had just three layers to its soundtrack: ambient, stress/proximity and combat. Brutish, perhaps, but effective. *Mankind Divided*'s compositions are plugged into the game's AI system and built from many more layers. Multiple ambient tracks mix with others that represent suspicious and alarmed AI states, all of which function under a more complex layer based on proximity. Then there are two styles of combat music to differentiate between full-on fighting and mopping up the remnants of a routed force. The nuance of this design is such that the player can use the music as an additional augmentation, gleaning information about their surroundings and enemies in much the same way they could from X-ray ▶



FROM TOP Executive narrative director Mary DeMarle; executive art director Jonathan Jacques-Belletête; executive audio director Steve Szczepkowski





vision. It's a setup that in effect bestows players with a real-life awareness augmentation of their own.

"All of this becomes a sonic language in the game, and after a while you can read it," executive audio director **Steve Szczepkowski** tells us. "At this point, I could stand with my back to the game and I could tell you what's going on because I'm used to it – and I'm hoping people will get that language as they play.

"But the one that I'm really happy about is combat. It always bugged me in *Human Revolution* that you only had one combat layer. So you're in a fight with ten people and everything's rocking and rolling, but now let's say you're down to only two NPCs – the music never changes. The music's still this big balls-to-the-wall, guns-blazing, John-Rambo-on-11 fight theme, and yet there are only two guys. Now, we can scale it down as your combatants fall. It's all about trying to use the tools we have to give a much richer, more cinematic experience where the music's reacting to everything you do, so when you put the controller down you feel like you've been playing your favourite TV show."

**Our favourite TV** show right now is *Game Of Thrones*, but we take his point. What's clear from the excitement shown by everyone we talk to is that there is a passion within the studio for creating the best *Deus Ex* game possible, but also a tinge of regret that *Human Revolution* wasn't it. Almost every example we're shown of something great in *Mankind Divided* is caveated with a self-deprecating – sometimes even self-flagellating – nod to one of *Human Revolution*'s failures. In fact, so ingrained is this attitude within every member of the team that it would be tempting to suspect it was an orchestrated PR push based on reverse psychology. But after spending time at the studio, it's evident that the sentiment is genuine – the reality is that this medium-sized team took criticisms of its first game hard and is now entirely focused on avoiding any kind of repeat of them. The contrition is real, if not entirely justified, and simply a manifestation of how much everyone here cares.

"We want to push *Mankind Divided* to the next level," Dugas says. "*Human Revolution* was a very ambitious game – the scope was huge. There's a lot of detail and a lot of thinking behind what we did, but the game could feel rough around the edges. It didn't feel like the production values were always what they should have been or what we would have loved to achieve. So we're working really hard to raise the production values of *Mankind Divided*.

"It's a direct sequel to *Human Revolution*, so we're not tearing things down and starting over on a new experience – we're building on the foundations of the last game and we're trying to bring it forward and expand it further. The difference this time is it's scary, because we've been through it before, and we know what it takes." ■

The detail on show throughout our demo is phenomenal. Every surface is littered with componentry or detritus, but the artistry is retained despite the busier look

Although everyone looks the same in an exosuit, the team is keen to point out that the game has as many female combatants as it does male, a claim that's corroborated when we encounter groups of less-armoured foes







## POST METAL



Jacques-Belletête: "I think that we have among the best hair this generation. It consistently looks good, but sometimes I see it in the right conditions and even after all these months I'm still like, 'Holy crap!'"



Guns are modular and customisable, and the current build of the game makes the most of its weapon models by keeping the menu for components in-game



LEFT Corroded components, thriving plant life, flapping ribbons and improvised turbines that react to the wind passing through Golem City's man-made crevices: all imbue life into Eidos's fictionalised take on Kowloon Walled City. BELOW RIGHT The physics-enabled environments aren't just for show. During an escape, this platform creates a distraction once we shoot out its support poles







## NARRATIVE DISSIDENTS

Story has always been an important component of *Deus Ex*, but *Mankind Divided* is folding it into gameplay with uncommon skill. "You are Adam Jensen, and it's your decisions and your choices that are driving the story," executive narrative director **Mary DeMarle** tells us. "One of the things that we're pushing is that there are many more story-driven choices for you to make, and this will enable you to change the course of the story much more than in *Human Revolution*."

"It no longer comes down to making a decision at the end of the game that defines which ending you get – choices early on in the game will cut off storylines for you, will affect the conclusion, and will create new opportunities down the line. We're investing a lot more in making the story much more adaptive, presenting choices early on that will have repercussions on the critical path all throughout the game."

The whole team is closely knit, but the relationship between DeMarle and game director Jean-François Dugas is especially striking. "I've been in the industry for almost 20 years now, and I know that for much of that time it was a fight to champion story," DeMarle explains. "It wasn't until I came here and started working with JF that I was like, 'Finally, someone gets that it's important!' JF and I are the story drivers and we do work incredibly closely together."

The theme of *Mankind Divided* is the very human battle between reason and emotion. Jensen is personally invested in finding the people who apparently killed his former lover, Sarif Industries' head scientist Megan Reed, but he also has a job to perform as a member of an organization tasked with protecting the general public from the dangers posed by augmented humans. At the same time, his boundaries there are muddled by his own modifications, his ongoing affiliation with augmented individuals, and a desire to prevent their mistreatment. Tackling things in a far less considered way are the terrorists who are lashing out at their segregation from society. But all of this is just one small part of a wider story that Eidos Montreal intends to tell through the *Deus Ex* Universe, its term for the collection of other games and media that will orbit, and succeed, *Mankind Divided*.

"We want to have a series of core products that are going to be [supported] by transmedia products, which are going to tell a bigger story," Dugas offers vaguely. "And our goal is to eventually have all of those products working together in a meaningful way. We're not ready to go deeper than that today, but [Deus Ex Universe is] not an MMOG. It's about expanding the world on a regular basis as much as possible."



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# COLLECTED WORKS

## TIM SCHAFER

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### DAY OF THE TENTACLE

Publisher/developer LucasArts Format PC Release 1993

### FULL THROTTLE

Publisher/developer LucasArts Format PC Release 1995

### GRIM FANDANGO

Publisher/developer LucasArts Format PC Release 1998

### PSYCHONAUTS

Publisher Majesco Developer Double Fine Format PC, PS2, Xbox Release 2005

### BRÜTAL LEGEND

Publisher EA Developer Double Fine Format 360, PS3 Release 2009

### DOUBLE FINE HAPPY ACTION THEATRE

Publisher Microsoft Developer Double Fine Format 360 Release 2012

### BROKEN AGE

Publisher/developer Double Fine Format Android, iOS, Ouya, PC, PS4, Vita Release 2014 (Act 1), April (Act 2)

The Double Fine founder and Grim Fandango creator points to the games that helped him learn, and unlearn, his craft

By **BEN MAXWELL**

Photography **Rob Monk**







D

uring a phone interview for a role at LucasFilm Games, **Tim Schafer** made the mistake of mentioning his appreciation for its firstperson sports game, *Ballblaster*. The name dropping might have gone better if he'd used *Ballblazer*, the name the studio christened the final game with, rather than the development name that stuck with the pirated version. No matter, he still got the job, and found himself playtesting point-and-click tie-in *Indiana Jones And The Last Crusade*. Soon after, he was assigned to Ron Gilbert's *The Secret Of Monkey Island* team as both a writer and programmer. Schafer's career progressed rapidly from there, and in the early '90s he found himself co-helming the production of a quasi-sequel to *Maniac Mansion*, *Day Of The Tentacle*, the first of three point-and-click adventure classics to bear his name on the box. Then in 2000, Schafer founded Double Fine, and began exploring other genres, other ways of working, and even new methods of funding. But his most recent project, two-partner *Broken Age*, is a return to the genre that he cut his teeth in and, indeed, the character-swapping that accompanied his first lead designer's credit.

## DAY OF THE TENTACLE

Publisher/developer LucasArts Format PC Release 1993

**"This was my** first time running a project, but I was lucky to be a co-project leader with Dave Grossman, which helped a lot. Dave and I were both 'scummlets', which was LucasFilm Games' lovely term for junior programmers. We got hired the same day, learned [scripting language]



TOP Some see *DOTT* as a little creepy. Not Schafer: "I always thought of it like a wholesome Chuck Jones cartoon. Maybe it's me; maybe I'm the creep." ABOVE 1995's *Full Throttle* focused on a capable point-and-click game lead, Ben



SCUMM at the same time, and we both worked on *Monkey Island 1* and 2 with Ron Gilbert. Then they said, 'We think you should run your own projects.' But we were scared, so we ran one together. They wanted to do a sequel to *Maniac Mansion*, and that became *Day Of The Tentacle*.

It went pretty smoothly; I feel like that was the last easy project I can remember. It was pretty easy to work out. It has time travel, but it doesn't really have time travel. You just go to these three different locations, basically, and they have cause and effect, but it's not exactly Primer. It's like Primer for toddlers. *Day Of The Tentacle* has some similarities to *Broken Age* in that you switch back and forth between the characters, but you can't flush objects to each other [in *Broken Age*].

It was fun to think of those puzzles, to think about how things affect the future, how you could change the Constitution of America to put a vacuum cleaner in a room that you needed it in. Adventure games always have you doing something catastrophic to someone else's life in order to bring something really mundane into your hands. Like, you're always getting someone fired from a job so that you can get a potato peeler, and terrible things like that. So changing the American Constitution is small fries, really.

It was one of the, if not *the*, first talkies: every line of dialogue in the game was recorded. They had Chris Brown on that, who still does voice work for the games I'm making now, and she helped write the original union contract for the writers, because there wasn't really a SAG-AFTRA [the merged Screen Actors Guild, and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists] contract for games yet.

Lucas was making [point-and-clicks] before we got there, games like *Zak McKracken And The Alien Mindbenders* and *Maniac Mansion*. And [Sierra's] *Kings Quest* was out, and doing so well that I always felt that we were chasing that. And it felt like we were part of this crazy time at Lucas where they were prevented from making Star Wars games for some business reason. So they had to just keep making up new stuff all the time. Which was crazy, because I didn't realise then how hard it was to get original IP launched and made — that's all we were doing, just making up new IP with every single game. It was like, 'Oh, we've done pirates. Let's try bikers.' These days, you have to fight for the right to launch IP. Indie games do it all the time, but for triple-A people, they say it's like launching a new car line: you've got to really spend a lot of money.

But we learned to get organised doing that game. Everyone on my current team would laugh at that, because I'm not that organised. But in the old days, when we were scummlets, Ron would come upstairs and be like, 'OK, we're going to work on the pirate ship now; the artists are drawing the pirate ship stuff, it's going to come up later today.' And then the pirate ship rooms would come up, or some other part of the island, and we'd be like, 'Er, OK, let's figure out how this hooks together.' Ron had a plan, but it definitely felt like we were just being told the day before what it was we were going to do.

It evolved like that, and then at a certain point everyone panics, because you've suddenly got to get the game in shape. As games get more complicated, that [way of working] becomes more and more impossible. So *Day Of The Tentacle* was the first game we ever storyboarded. We did rough sketches of every single

room in advance, and hooked up all these Peter Chan black-and-white sketches into a version you could walk through. And localisation started to happen, so we had to get the script together.

It was really more this process of starting to learn creative leadership, going from being a junior programmer who could just crunch all night on something and then all of sudden being in charge and telling some other programmer to crunch all night was just not as fun to do. 'Hey, you've got to stay here all night because that's what I used to do!'"

## FULL THROTTLE

Publisher/developer LucasArts Format PC Release 1995

**"One of the** things I was thinking about was that we always have these loveable losers in the game, like Bernard, Guybrush Treepwood, etc. The characters are always the butt of the jokes and being made fun of, and we like that, because we like to laugh at ourselves, we're comfortable with ourselves. But what if people aren't necessarily confident and they don't necessarily want to be the butt of the joke? What if someone actually wanted to be stronger than they are in real life, and tougher and cooler?"

And that's where the character, Ben, came from — it was part of my original pitch. In some ways, it was tied to trying to be more successful — like, 'How can I get people to buy these games like they do with *Kings Quest*?'"

After *Day Of The Tentacle*, it was like, 'Right, we have to make a game. Erm, what could the game be?' It's really hard to just think of something. We had about five ideas, but it wasn't until a friend started telling me stories of a summer they spent hanging out in this biker bar and meeting all these crazy characters — like Big Rick and Smiling Phil — that I started feeling confident. And I just thought that was such a great, weird world that you don't normally get to go to. Like pirates, you know? It has its own lore and stuff.

So I was reading Hell's Angels by Hunter Thompson, and there's a lot of



**"HE WAS LIKE,  
'AH, IT'S TOO  
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darkness in those stories. In some ways, [*Full Throttle*] really sugarcoated bikers. When we first started talking about it, management was like, 'Wait, you're going to make a game about selling speed and beating people up?' And I was like, 'No, no, not like that.' It was a lot more like *The Wild One* than *Sons Of Anarchy*, but every story tells you where it wants to go, and Ben's story was like a lot of gunslinger movies. Their era is ending and there's going to be [a bunch of] these 'last' shootouts. This guy is getting rid of bikes, he's going to turn them all into minivans, so Ben's going to fight against that.

But it was also inspired by Toshiro Mifune and movies such as *Yojimbo*. The old samurai movies always have these quiet characters in them who don't talk

that much. They have these odd twitches they do, and then they slice one of the guys up with a samurai sword and go back to being quiet again — that was a big inspiration for Ben.

I remember in the original storyboards when I wrote it all out, I had the scene where Corley gets beat with the cane and someone from management wrote, 'You've just lost 25 per cent of your audience,' in red pen. I was like, 'Huh, shall I cut that part out?' But it seemed really important to the story and Ben's motivation. I just had to explain it was an important part of the story — and anyway, he wasn't a powerful person in management [laughs].

The battles were a very controversial part of the game, too. I think they came from thinking about the character and what kind of activities that character would want to do. He's a biker, and you want to have some parts where he's just riding on the road. In our heads, bikers just fight on motorcycles all the time — probably not what real bikers do much. But it just seemed like part of the fantasy of that character that we had to deal with. There are some bugs in that code that make it so it gets faster and harder every year. It's not locked to a certain framerate, so when I tried to play it recently during a streaming, I couldn't beat the first guy, and he was really easy originally!

It was an attempt to try to make adventure games more appealing to some people. I think there was concern that adventure games were not appealing enough, because they weren't bringing in these big audiences. But also that people would want a change of pace after a while. And Lucas games always explored that. There was all the fighting in *Indiana Jones*. Originally, *Monkey Island* was going to have sword fighting, too, but I think Ron predicted the reaction that [*Full Throttle* got] from adventure gamers. He was like, 'Ah, it's too action-y to have sword fighting; let's just make it all insults'.

The only worry back on *Full Throttle* was that it was short when it came out. That was a big thing, because we'd put a lot of emphasis on the presentation. The cutscenes were so dramatic, and we hadn't really done that in *Day Of The Tentacle* ►



## COLLECTED WORKS

— we had full-scene, full-screen animations for the first time, and that took a lot of time. It's probably why the play time was relatively short. I mean, it was still eight hours, which isn't that short now, but seemed shockingly short at the time. Back then, we always used to say that adventure games were 40 hours. We never clocked it, it just *felt* like 40 hours.

### GRIM FANDANGO

Publisher/developer LucasArts Format PC Release 1998

**“The reason we** were able to make earlier games quickly — *Monkey Island* took a year and nine months to make — was SCUMM. The system was already there and we just had to make new content for it. Improve on that system a little, sure, but not really start from scratch. With *Grim*, we started from scratch, and with *Broken Age*, too; they both took three years. That's the basis, I think. If you're going to start with a new engine, it's going to take three years, because the first year's just the engine.

I was resistant to doing 3D, but there was a lot of pressure to do it, because it was the hip new thing in the late '90s. We always liked our 2D adventure games and the painterly look that they had, but then I played *Bioforge*, which was an adventure game with 3D characters on prerendered backgrounds. You pull a guy's arm off and beat him with it. The thing I liked about it was that there was this bit where you walk down a hallway and you don't know what's at the end of it. And the camera cuts to a side view, then a top-down view, then a low angle view as you're walking. And it's like, ‘This is so dramatic.’ But I never had to think about which direction to push the controller in, because I was just going forward the whole time. So that's why *Grim* had tank controls.

But I wasn't nervous about [changing the adventure template], because I never think these things through [laughs]. It's hard to put an idea forward when it doesn't exist and try to tell people it'll be great to do a game about the Day Of The Dead, bikers or whatever. But it usually



TOP *Grim Fandango* has recently been remastered for PC, PS4 and Vita. It's just as characterful as it was way back in 1998. ABOVE A bizarre journey into the depths of the psyche, *Psychonauts* is as disturbing as it is amusing



comes from something that you're really interested in — I was interested in the Day Of The Dead, and so it's natural to be excited about it, and I think people pick up on that enthusiasm. And they're like, ‘Oh, actually it *would* be interesting to make a Day Of The Dead game.’

*Grim* was the last adventure game an American company spent money on for years. I have friends who worked in another company, and they tried to make an adventure game, but their boss was like, ‘Well, *Grim* didn't sell, so we're not going to make it.’ So I was like, ‘Oh, so this game has actually hurt the industry.’ But the thing is, it didn't sell that badly by today's standards. A lot of the time people just want those underdog stories to be true, but *Grim* sold like 500,000 during its initial release. You'd definitely like to sell more than that, but anyway.

But I didn't stop making adventure games right then because I was told not to make them any more. I got my own ideas. While we were making *Grim Fandango*,

I was playing a lot of *Mario 64*, *Tomb Raider* and *Final Fantasy VII*, and having these games where you were exploring a 3D world in a very natural way — just walking through doors and not having to select ‘Open’ or ‘Use door’. I just really wanted to make a game like that, where it's so easy to explore the space and you feel like you're in a world. And because I was playing a lot of console games, it seemed natural to make one. It wasn't just that the market was closing in on adventure games, it was a desire to try something new.”

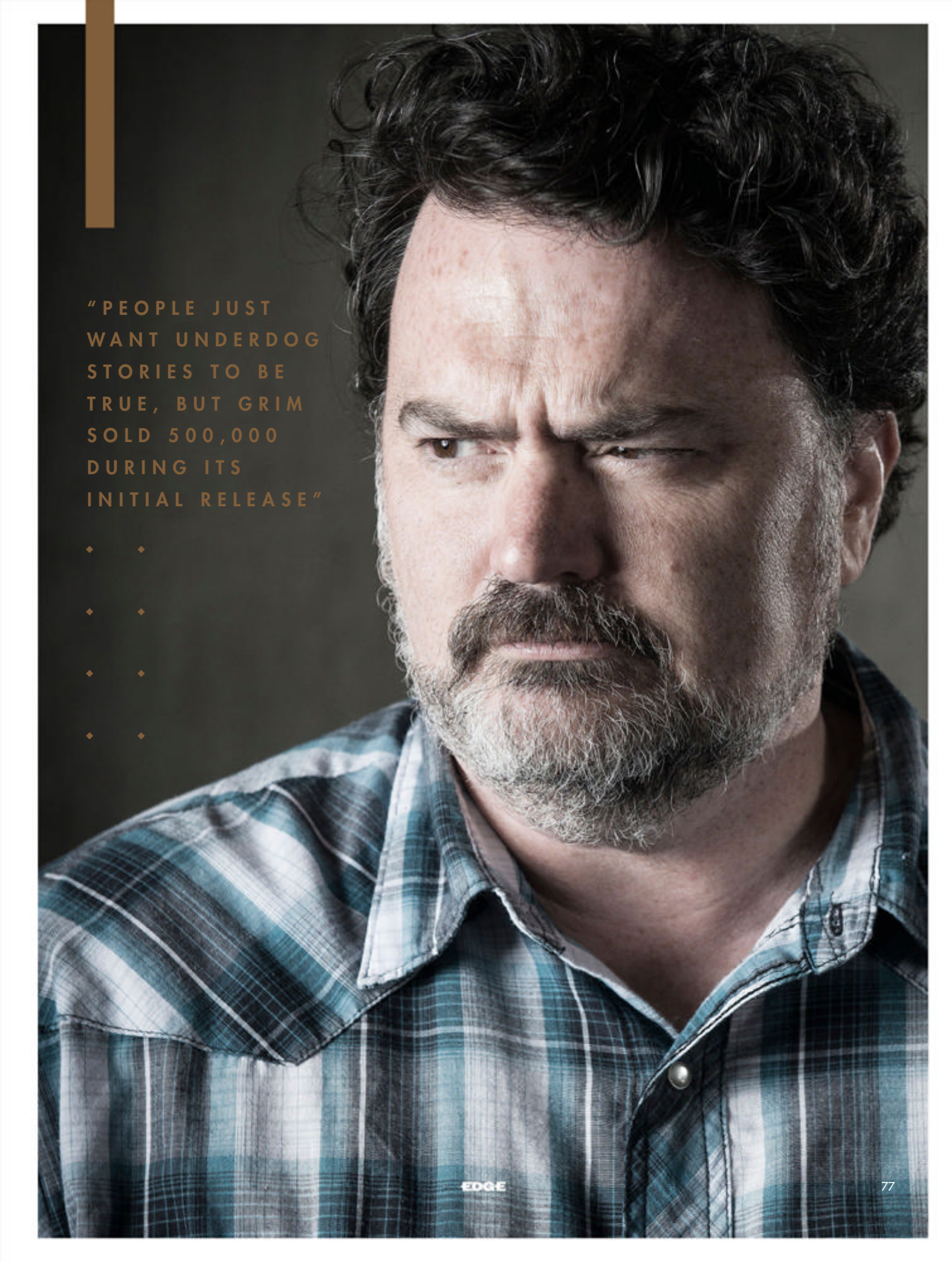
### PSYCHONAUTS

Publisher Majesco Developer Double Fine Format PC, PS2, Xbox Release 2005

**“I was starting** to think about designs for a console game that would still have adventure game elements, but that would have a lot of what I was experiencing in [console] games. And then [LucasArts'] president was talking about my next game, saying, ‘I think you should consider making an action game on the PS2,’ and I was like, ‘Oh, I'm already thinking about something!’

Luckily, I didn't think this one through either. Starting another engine from scratch and having never worked on console games... We had one guy on the team who had worked with consoles previously. The Xbox had just launched, which was really fortuitous because Ed Fries was running it. He talked a lot about games as art and wanted to do games that were pushing that, and that's what I was talking about, too. So we got signed with Microsoft. We pitched to Sony, too, but they were like, ‘Well, you've never made one of these kinds of game before. Why don't you send us the design document for a level?’ Microsoft was, like, ‘Let's go!’ So we went with them. Sony was probably right to question whether we could make one of these games. Eventually, we hired people with more experience, and we know a lot more now. We learned a lot.

It was a big change. Because of the magic of Star Wars around LucasArts, ▶



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"WHY DID  
MICROSOFT  
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BUT EVENTUALLY  
THEY STOPPED"

everybody wants to work there, so we got some really amazingly talented people, and I was just so used to working with all these amazing people who knew exactly what they were doing. And, of course, we were doing adventure games ever year, so we were really comfortable and confident in that. And now all of a sudden we were starting a new project, and a lot of people were outside of that safe space and not comfortable with what they were doing. We hired some people who didn't work out, and I'd never experienced that before. Running a company, having to hire and fire people, having to negotiate a lease on office space: all that stuff was all new to me. So it definitely felt like we were overwhelmed, but it never occurred to us to give up on it.

The original time frame was two years, but *Psychonauts* took five. We had to go and ask for more money every time we ran out, and got in trouble. But [Microsoft] gave it to us a couple of times, despite the fact that our first playable for the game really wasn't fun. We had all these concepts for the levels and some great concept art, but the motion of the character was just off. We'd spent so much time on the environments that the characters didn't feel right and we had to have this emergency taskforce meeting where we decided to focus on [Razputin Aquato] finally.

In adventure games, you go really wide and rough over the whole thing to get the scope of the game in your head. But with any sort of action game you shouldn't go really wide until you have that core immediate gameplay loop. There's not really a gameplay loop in an adventure game. There's walk, pick up object, use object on other object... There's not really second-by-second gameplay in it. But any sort of physical game, you're thinking about the jumping, walking and grabbing ledges and stuff. So that really needs to be worked out before you start thinking about the scope. We built a load of levels, and then we changed the way that the levitation ball works under you, and it broke every barrier we had, because you could all of a sudden hop super high, float in the air and go over every wall.



Jack Black played *Brütal Legend*'s Eddie Riggs, a part made for him. "[Eddie is] inspired by a mix of things," Schafer says, "but the biggest part was probably Jack in *School Of Rock* or *Tenacious D*"

We threw out a lot of versions of the levels. And it was shocking having our first playable not be fun, because we were so used to feeling confident in our ability to make games and make them good. And then it's like, 'Wait, these things can be *not* fun if you don't do them right...'

Why did Microsoft keep giving us more money? I don't know, but eventually they stopped and just cancelled it. But that was more because they said they just didn't want to work on an Xbox game any more — basically, we were at risk of missing the first generation of consoles! They were starting to work on Xbox 360 and were like, 'If it's going to come out beyond 2004, it's cancelled.' And we were just like, 'But we're just coming out in February of 2005...' And they were like, 'Sorry.' Ed had left, who was our big benefactor — he was probably the reason they kept giving us money, and then he was gone, so they cancelled it.

That was a very dark time, because if the company went out of business it would have meant we had spent the past four years on nothing. The company never would have shipped a game. *Psychonauts* would become one of those infamous mystery games that no one ever played. So we just took it on the road and showed it to every single publisher, and they all passed on it except for Majesco. After that, we crunched really hard and made it! We don't remember the crunch though [laughs]. We were just so focused on getting that game done.

## BRÜTAL LEGEND

Publisher EA Developer Double Fine Format 360, PS3 Release 2009

**"*Brütal Legend* was** a more complicated game, but we had a more experienced team. We had our processes down a lot better, and the Vivendi version of Sierra was very supportive. Then the Activision merger happened and everything became mysteriously quiet. That wasn't great, but then EA picked us up and was very supportive, too. The game had a lot of great things, like getting the involvement of Jack Black and all these musicians — it felt like we were making something really big. It was getting a lot of attention and we thought it was going to be really special.

I met [Black] at the Four Seasons in LA and showed him all the concept art, and right then he was like, 'I'm into it. Let's do it!' I felt that Jack Black would really like the game, like I was making it for him, so it was nice to get that validation directly. He'd played *Psychonauts*, which helped, and he'd heard me talking about the game on National Public Radio once, so that was our in. He was down for whatever crazy, scrappy things we were doing, like shooting that intro with one camera in the record store. He wasn't above any low-budget adventures.

We took a similar approach with *Brütal Legend* to *Full Throttle*. The fantasy is you're this metal guy. Should he be able to use a broad axe? Yes. Should he have big bloody demon wings? Yes. Should he have a hotrod car? Of course. Should he have a guitar? Yes. And then, pretty soon, you have tons of stuff going on in that game, and that gets you in trouble. But it's always how we approached it: first starting from what we think would be a cool world to explore, and then who you want to be in that world. After that, it becomes about what [the player] should be able to do to really be living that fantasy. Should you have action in an adventure game? I mean, obviously, with *Broken Age* we decided not to have anything outside the world of adventure games. But I still think it's something worth talking about when



## COLLECTED WORKS

you're making a game. Should this character be bound by the gameplay conventions of that genre, or should they be free to explore all the powers that character should have?

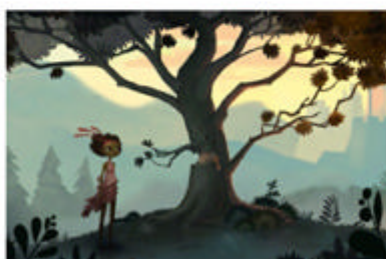
I feel like with both *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend*, if we'd pitched the games they were going to end up being at the beginning, they probably never would have got signed. I feel like we've made two impossible projects that shouldn't exist. Sure, if you could go back and do them again, you could avoid all the problems. But we tried different things and when things didn't work out, we tried them a different way and eventually learned how to make them correctly. It's easy to say you would go back and not do them those other ways, but we *had* to do them all to find the games they eventually became.

### DOUBLE FINE HAPPY ACTION THEATRE

Publisher Microsoft Developer Double Fine Format 360 Release 2012

**"This was the** first game I ever signed over the phone without any sort of pitch. I just called the people at Microsoft and was like, 'Y'know, Kinect is cool, and I'm playing some of the games with my daughter, but it's still too hard for her.' She was playing *Kinectimals*, which you'd think would be perfect because you've got to pet all these different furry baby tigers and stuff. But in order to do that, you first have to stand in one spot and hold your arm up in a certain way while this timer goes down. No two-year-old will do that; they'll just run around the room. And there was a lot of stuff in the early days of Kinect about signing in and out, and all these things little kids can't do. I thought it was a perfect opportunity to make a game with absolutely no barriers to entry.

I was thinking about those advertising campaigns you'd see in the mall — there was this one in San Francisco where there was a floor display and popcorn on the ground, and you'd step on it and it would pop. Kids were always playing with that, and I was thinking, 'What if you had a game that was that simple?' That's really



TOP Kinect might have failed to convince players, but *Happy Action Theatre* makes a rare case for the peripheral's featureset. ABOVE *Broken Age* sees Schafer return to his roots, but the huge support took him by surprise



where it came from. So I just called up and pitched it, and it was cheap and fast and we just went into it. We had tons of ideas and culled them down from a bigger list to come up with enough for *Happy Action Theatre* and then the sequel.

There's a setting, but it was purely about what you could do when you don't have any instructions or any tutorials, so it kept us focused on just the delight of seeing people react to what's on the screen. We were inspired by a blog of Kinect hacks. People were just doing crazy stuff you couldn't do with a retail Xbox, like flying drones around. And I think we actually made some changes inside Microsoft. I don't know, but I heard rumours that people talked about our game and the expression they used in their meetings was, 'Kinect under five doesn't have to end in tears' [laughs].

It was odd that it happened, because I wasn't supposed to be running projects. We were doing this new model where games like *Stacking* and *Costume Quest*

were run by other people, and I was just going to be managing. But then I had this idea, and I was like, 'I really want to make this one tiny game'. So I made it and then handed the sequel off to someone else. It was a weird aberration, in a way, but it was super fun to do and I would have kept making them if everyone had a Kinect.

It's still the game I feel I'm most proud of. When you watch people play it, it's such a crazy experience. You bring it home at Thanksgiving and your grandma is playing it with a two-year-old and the family dog is there and the camera still picks him up. You just see so many people having so much fun and laughing and playing together. 'Unbridled joy' is not a term you would use for watching someone playing an adventure game. You think of focus, concentration, frustration and relief [laughs]. But it's a joy watching people tumble around a room and playing in a field of hot lava, or underwater, and all the things you can do with that game. I still turn it on whenever I have a party."

### BROKEN AGE

Publisher/developer Double Fine Format Android, iOS, Ouya, PC, PS4, Vita Release 2014 (Act 1), April (Act 2)

**"It was amazing** [to break all those Kickstarter records], because it was the opposite of the '90s, where it felt like adventure games weren't selling enough and weren't popular. We were always chasing that, and then all of a sudden to have this thing that seems like an explosive success, and have it be tied to adventure games, was such a great vindication of that. Especially after the *Grim* experience. Just having people rally around adventure games was exciting, and also seeing how they felt about the power they had. It wasn't like we held all this power because we did some Kickstarter; the backers were like, 'We're part of the movement. We like adventure games. We're telling the world that, and everyone's paying attention. We made an adventure game happen.' Which is great because they were always there — for the past ten years they've been mailing me

saying, 'When are you going to do an adventure game? I'd buy a copy.' So I'm like, 'Well, OK, that's \$30, maybe... If we could just add all of those together, maybe we could pay for a game'.

My mind used to be set in the ways of adventure games, and I've been subduing and unlearning those skills over the years — they're kind of frowned upon in games today. Doing something that's scripted that only happens in a particular way that's predetermined and the player's just discovering stuff, it goes against what a lot of people think games should be, which is systemic, emergent gameplay in which you don't know what's going to happen. And those games are cool, but seeing this happen with *Broken Age*, and a lot of narrative-based games like *The Last Of Us* that have been popular in the past few years, I think people are realising that both of those types of games are really good. They're really, really different; a prescribed game like an adventure or *The Last Of Us* is crafted for you to have this amazing experience, and it might happen the same way every time, but it's been thought out to be this great thing to discover and explore. It's just as valid as a more emergent, systemic type of game. I think that's part of the industry diversifying and realising that there are a million different types of games for a million different types of players, and it doesn't have to be this one focus every year.

I was looking at modern adventure games, too. I looked a lot at *Machinarium* and I felt the one-click interface was something that we were always pushing towards in adventure games. At Lucas, we were always losing verbs, realising that it's not that interesting to click 'Open' on a door. Even though the player has more control because they can select 'Open' on a door, they really just want to click on the door and have it do whatever it does. We worried in the old days about getting down to just one verb: 'Use'. People were like, 'That's not going to be an adventure any more, because you're not deciding whether to Turn On the lamp, Fix the lamp, or Open it. What if there's a little door in the lamp that you could open?' And then they realised that we weren't



**"I STILL LIKE  
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VERB TO USE"**

using any of those options anyway, because it's really unfair. If you have a whole game where you're mostly turning on and off lamps and there's one that you can open because it has a door, no one will ever do that. So playing *Machinarium* made me realise that it does work to have this one Use verb, which is just clicking on things. Some people don't like that and want all the verbs so that you can hear what the character's thinking about objects, and I can see that helps you with the character, but I still like designing puzzles that are more about context than about which exact verb to use.

Kickstarter took a lot of the risk away, and it made us more unapologetic about making an adventure game. So whereas with *Full Throttle* we added those action

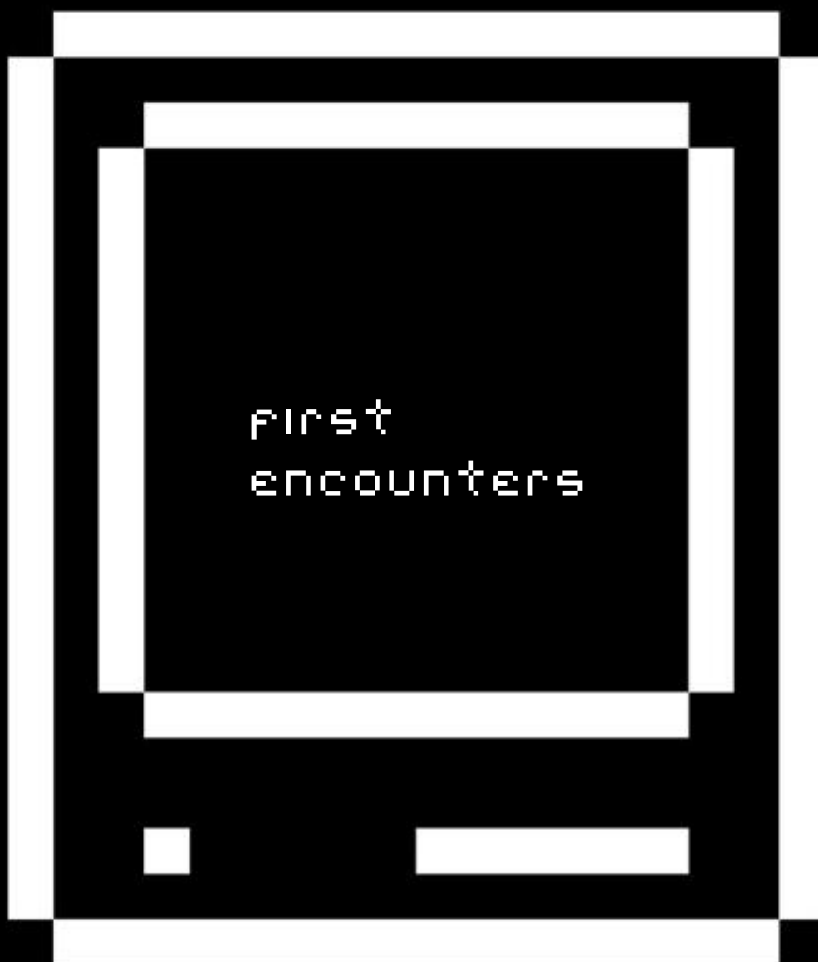
sequences almost as a way of apologising for the straight adventure gameplay, here we can be like, 'Well we know that the people who paid for it like adventure games, so we're just going to make one.'

It was envisioned as one piece, but splitting it let us get something out and not have to wait three years. We were definitely worried about that, but looking back at it, I don't really know why. All we ended up doing is basically funding a second game on our own. The first half was paid for by Kickstarter, and the second half was paid for by Double Fine. The backers still get it for free, so I don't really know what anyone would have to be angry about. But the story at the time was, 'Oh, they've lost all the money and the game's not done.' And so that was something we just had to endure until now, when we can prove we were always working on it. I think we clocked the first half at four hours, but the second half is something like eight to ten. And we made it in half the time.

None of that backlash came from our backers, really. They were very supportive and understanding of what was going on. But there's a kind of anti-crowdfunding movement out there: people who feel that it's anti-consumer in the same way that preordering a game is taking money when there's a risk of not being able to deliver. And those people will always be there, but backing a project is optional. You don't have to preorder, and the people who don't want to do those things just shouldn't do it. But there are also people who really want to do it, and so it's a great match for people like us who really want to make things for them.

All those stories about games being cancelled and hard to make — the only thing that keeps people [going] through those times is believing in the game and liking it. If you felt like you were just doing it for the money and then it got cancelled, then you'd probably give up on it. You'd be like, 'Well, that's a sign that no one wants this game; let's not make it,' as opposed to, 'We love this game and we really want this thing to see the light of day,' and that's what makes it worthwhile to push through all the troubles. ■





The tribalism, tribulations and tumultuous  
growth of UK development, drawn  
from Britsoft: An Oral History

By **ALEX WILTSHIRE**

Hardware illustrations **Julia/Read-Only Memory**

In today's climate of ten-year console cycles and annualised sequels, it's hard to grasp the sheer density of change that the videogame experienced in the 1980s. Platforms would come and go in a matter of a couple of years, game genres would be founded, explored and built upon across just a few months. Fortunes were made and lost in the breathless rush of the early British game industry - and most extraordinary was that the greatest creative leaps were often made by teenagers. With platforms such as the ZX Spectrum, Commodore 64 and BBC Micro, a generation of young game makers suddenly had the tools to create worlds.

Their stories are captured in Britsoft: An Oral History, a forthcoming book featuring interviews with leading figures from the formative British videogame industry originally conducted for the documentary *From Bedrooms To Billions*. This excerpt focuses on their earliest forays into a wondrous new field.



*Britsoft: An Oral History* will be published this summer by Read-Only Memory, and is available to preorder now from [readonlymemory.vg](http://readonlymemory.vg)



"We had a computer at school with a punch-card reader that you used a pencil to fill in these boxes in the punch card. It was really laborious, but I used to stay after school because there was only one keyboard, and I'd be there until like 12 o'clock at night, until the janitor chucked me out. That was my first experience of programming. Then my dad had a Commodore PET, which used BASIC. He was a contact lens designer and was trying to work out the curvature of the contact lenses using equations, so he wanted us to program them onto his Commodore PET. For me, it was really trying to work out how BASIC worked.

Our grandparents used to get fed up with my brother and me being in the living room on our computers for hours and hours, so they would send us to the bedroom, so we just used to spend hours and hours programming away quite happily in this secret world. I was really interested in electronics. My granddad was a colour TV designer in Australia and he taught us how to build crystal radio sets and gadgets to count how many people came into a room, and when we went on holiday, we built a gadget to feed the fish. We used to go down to this electronics shop to buy transistors, capacitors and resistors to make all these things, so when home computers came out it was kind of logical that we'd want to work out how you could control these more advanced electronic devices.

I also had a computer studies teacher called Mr Evans. For my computer studies coursework, I did a game in machine code, and he couldn't understand it, so he failed me. He said, 'Stop doing games, they're a waste of time. If you want to get into software you need to get into business software.' This carried on through my career, really."

#### **David Darling**

Co-founder, Codemasters



"Do you know, it was the best of times, the worst of times. I grew up in Liverpool and moved out to Runcorn as a teenager. It was like Boys From The Blackstuff, it really was. My dad was a builder, times were hard; we only ever had three channels on the telly and not much else to do.

It wasn't what computers did at the time, it was what in the future you could imagine them to do. There was no specific moment where I thought, 'Oh, computers, great! I want to make computer games!' because the business didn't exist at that time. Most of the stories of computer games were really coming from America, this vision of California and all the cool kids over there. You could never imagine them being made down the road in Liverpool, you know, by people in a bedroom. But, slowly and surely, games started creeping into our lives."

#### **Martin Kenwright**

Co-founder, Evolution Studios



"The early forerunner of the Internet was the International Packet Switched Service and we were hacking into it with our modems -

you know, an acoustic coupler - and we were logging into computers all over the world for the hell of it. The prize at the time was to log into Essex University and play MUD, and I was one of its first external players. I played it enough to attain the rank of wizard - I was Zaphod the wizard - and MUD was very important for me in teaching me about multiplayer games and how much fun and social they could be. I owe a lot to Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw, who were the innovators of that game. People asked me how I learned to type at 110 words per minute, and it was literally because I feared for my life. I had to type "kill troll with sword" fast enough that I wouldn't get killed myself.

#### **Jez San**

Founder, Argonaut Software



## "The home computer

gave you the feeling anyone could do anything, though that wasn't strictly true. They used to trade on this in some early adverts for **VIC-20s** and **Commodore 64s**, portraying this idea that you could do your accounts on it.

Most people went from **ZX81** to **Spectrum**, but I went the VIC-20 and Commodore 64 route. I think it was just because it felt like a richer, classier kind of experience. The ZX80 and ZX81 didn't have real keyboards, they had this weird kind of squishy pokey thing. The membrane on the ZX81 was an awful thing, and the Spectrum of course had these squishy little rubber keys. But we used to play lots of Spectrum games, though there was almost this class division which went on for years.

I didn't understand it at the time, because if you were a games player, why would you deny yourself a means of playing them just because they're on a different platform? But the playground wars came from the fact that we are tribal, so it was kind of almost unavoidable. You get the same thing with football teams, and maybe brands of car; it seems to be a perpetuating cultural thing where people will tie their colours to a mast.

You had to stick to the one you could afford, and I would have probably brought everything if I could afford them. But generally one of your friends would have a different computer, and everyone would pile round their house to play. There was an interesting social quality to gaming back then, where you would take turns and try and maximise the value of the thing you had bought by setting a series of challenges. So you would be taking turns and betting your friend that they can't do it in this time, or with one hand behind your back, or without jumping."

## Gary Penn

Development manager, Denki



"The first time would be **Pong** on a school trip in the early '70s to Bude in Cornwall. I was less than ten. I went through an arcade to get to an ice-cream van and instead of all the mechanical machines, there was this yellow thing with a dot bouncing around. Back then, I had never seen anything like it. I just stopped to think, 'What on Earth is that?' I put all my ice cream money into that **Pong** machine over the next 20 minutes or so, and the teachers sent out a search party trying to find out where I was.

So, yeah, that was a pretty inspirational moment. It was the lure of the moving white dot. I had never seen anything like it. There were no other videogames at that point, because everything else was all electromechanical. It was the game that started the whole industry. **Computer Space** came just before it, but unfortunately, as iconic as it was, **Computer Space** wasn't a success, whereas **Pong** sold hundreds of thousands of machines around the world."

**Archer MacLean**  
Designer/programmer,  
*International Karate* series

"I always loved the idea of worlds that you immerse yourself in. I was a huge fan of science-fiction books and would read them avidly, and I suppose when those books started to manifest themselves in films like the first **Star Wars**, it was really wonderful. You imagined that it was a consistent world that you were a part of. I suppose in parallel to that I always loved creating things, whether it was with Lego or Meccano or anything like that. So when computers came on the horizon, I found them unbelievably fascinating."

**David Braben**  
Co-creator, *Elite*





## FIRST ENCOUNTERS

**“I was working** as a systems engineer with Marconi. I had finished a physics degree at Bristol, and the first thing I had to do was programming in Fortran. I was dropped in at the deep end; there was a Fortran course at university, but I didn’t understand and didn’t attend the rest of it. In those days, every line of code had a punched card, so a program would be a whole deck of cards with a rubber band around it. You’d take it along to the computer room, a huge room filled with a computer with 32K of memory, leave it outside in a tray, and come back half an hour later to get your printout. That’s how I learned Fortran, doing mathematical modelling, and I guess my interest in simulation came from there.

While I was there, I had the idea, as a hobby, of getting some hardware that produces dots on a screen, a bit like the arcade games I used to see at service stations. I was also into electronics and made things like sound effects for my guitar. I had a vision of some sort of game about flying through a 3D environment. Well, I call it a game now, but I didn’t think of it as one then. So I was keeping an eye open for hardware as it was beginning to come out. You could buy motherboards that you could attach to a keyboard and things like that, but what really caught my eye was the



VIC-20. It had a colour display, and I realised that I didn’t need to cobble something together myself. So that was what I was going to do, but I went to a show at, I think, Olympia or Earls Court, and the [BBC Micro](#) was on show for the first time. I looked at that and everything about it just seemed better than the VIC-20, so I ordered it there and then and took delivery a few months later.

I took it out of the box and started looking at the manual. It had built-in BASIC, which is actually quite similar to Fortran, so it was quite easy to start creating programs. It also had built-in graphics, which meant you could very easily produce images and move them around, but after a couple of weeks of doing that I could see that it was far too slow to produce the sort of thing I had been seeing in the arcades, so I realised that I would have to work with an assembler. I knew about assembly from Marconi, though I didn’t actually work with it. I brought a book on the 6502 processor in the BBC Micro, and basically started learning how to do it. I started moving things on the screen really quickly, and that in itself was quite an addictive process, because when you have success it spurs you on.

I think it was just after I got the machine that we went on holiday to Corfu, and there was a hotel with a [Space Invaders](#) machine. I thought it would be a good thing to try to program, because I would learn how to do a proper game, so after the first week of our two-week holiday, I wanted to go home to get it going. You know, my wife didn’t appreciate that sentiment, really.”

**Geoff Crammond**  
Designer/programmer,  
*Revs, The Sentinel*

**It's kind of hard** to pinpoint when I first became interested in games, but maybe it was the early arcade machines I remember playing when I was hanging around in the bus station in Chelmsford when I was 13 or 14, waiting to get a bus home. [Centipede](#) and [Asteroids](#) and whatever. We all played the same games, the Japanese-made arcade machines, and one of my mates had an [Atari UCS](#) with the early racing games.

I mean, we didn't have any kind of games machine in my house until I was 17 years old, which maybe people would find rather stunning these days, but there weren't that many people with them back then... You went round your mate's house who had a machine and you were excited to be playing games. My friend with a UCS had all the latest contraptions in his house, one of those kinds of families. They also had a SodaStream, you know?

**Jon Hare**  
Co-founder, Sensible Software



**“My first computer** was a ZX81. I brought it secondhand from a friend at school for £25. For games, it was almost completely useless, because it had 1K of memory, but the 16K RAM pack made it really useful, so I got one and I could actually make games on it. So it was the computer that I first learned to program with. I would wait until the rest of my family had gone to sleep, sneak back into the living room, plug my ZX81 into the family TV, and I would code until 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning, and get up very sleepy for school the next day.

The release of the Sinclair Spectrum was a major event for the British game industry. It was, I think, the first computer that was both accessible in terms of price to people like me, and it also could be a platform for relatively sophisticated games. You actually had a huge amount of memory on the 48K model. You could use 40K for your programming data, which was amazing. The other computers at the time, like the Commodore 64, were more expensive, and I think that's what distinguished the Spectrum. It was cheap, it was powerful, and you could do a lot with it.

On the ZX81 there are only one or two games which really influenced me. One was 3D Monster Maze, which was technically really advanced. It was a pseudo-3D dungeon kind of game with monsters, and I really wanted to make games at that level of sophistication in Z80 assembly language. I wasn't really that interested in all the listings in magazines. I would look at the code, and think, 'OK, I'm already that advanced; I need to do something more sophisticated.'”

**Julian Gollop**  
Creator, Chaos, X-COM

**“I ended up** wandering into the wrong room at my sixth-form college, and there was some guy there who was sitting in front of a Commodore PET. It wasn't his own, it belonged to the college, and I didn't know what it was. It was this weird thing that looked like a telly with a keyboard underneath it, and I wandered over to have a look at what he was doing and he was playing some game... I'd seen Space Invaders, I'd seen Pong and things like that, but I'd never seen them on a computer before, so I said, 'Where did that game come from?' He said, 'Oh, I typed it in,' and I thought, 'Bloody hell, you can type games into computers! You type stuff into computers and games come out. I've got to find out how to do that.'

So I went away, borrowed a book on BASIC from the library, and I think I'd looked at some of my brother's Texas Instruments calculator programs the night before and hand-converted them to BASIC so I could type them in when I got in the next day. I came back in early the next morning, sat down in front of the Commodore PET with my book, and I went from there.

Until then I made no connection to how games were made or the possibility that somebody like me could make them. Videogames were things that were just made by some manufacturer somewhere, and they might as well have been made by God. I didn't connect them with any kind of human activity that I might get involved in.”

**Jeff Minter**  
Founder, Llamasoft



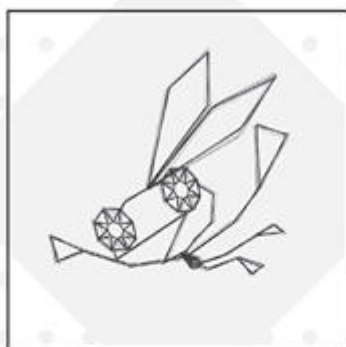
I think what sparked the interest in UK gaming was when home computers became available for the first time, so you could buy things like the ZX81 and ZX80, and the BBC Micro. There were thousands of kids all over the country who were using these new devices. Maybe they were into Isaac Asimov and sci-fi, and just loved the idea of robots and artificial intelligence and all of that kind of stuff, so they were able to use these home computers to live out their fantasies. Their parents and grandparents - nobody really understood what they were doing, so it was like a real adventure. Some kids got good at it and started making games, and then the industry developed from there, really. I think it was mostly the interest in the possibility of what computers could deliver to the human race.

David Darling





# T H E M A K I N G O F . . .



## V I B - R I B B O N

Masaya Matsuura's minimalist rhythm game co-opted its players' CD collections to build its quivering stages

By **SIMON PARKIN**

**Format** PlayStation  
**Publisher** SCE  
**Developer** NanaOn-Sha  
**Origin** Japan  
**Debut** 1999

**V**ib-Ribbon, a rhythm-matching game in which a bipedal, starry-eyed rabbit struts along a trembling white ribbon against a perfectly black screen, is one of the most distinctive games of the PlayStation era. Its scratchy starkness recalls vector-based games such as *Asteroids*, an aesthetic that was wholly incongruous at a time when most Japanese developers were exploring the far reaches of PlayStation's millions-strong colour palette.

But *Vib-Ribbon*'s black-and-white minimalist style was one dictated not by creative direction so much as technological constraint. Three years earlier, **Masaya Matsuura** had invented rhythm-action with his Sesame Streetesque hip-hop adventure *PaRappa The Rapper*. Despite following that up with the rock-based *UmJammer Lammy* in early 1999, he had grown tired of requests from fans to see their favourite musical genre represented in one of his games. As a result, he planned a title that could analyse a CD's audio data and then use it to create not only a soundtrack for the game, but also a level out of any piece of music, suiting any taste.

The system was simple but elegant: after loading the game, the PlayStation's lid could be popped open and the game disc swapped with an audio CD of your choosing. The trick – one that Sony surely never planned for – demanded, however, that the entire game's data be loaded into the console's memory pool; nothing could be streamed from the disc after the initial load. "You can imagine how annoying it would have been if you had to reinsert the game disc to load in all of the game's art and assets every time you wanted to change the music to a different CD," Matsuura says. "So we knew that with *Vib-Ribbon*, we had to make it so that you would almost never have to pick up the disc again once you started the game. In order to do that, all the game's data had to fit onto the PlayStation's limited memory. The only way to make that work was to build the gameworld from a series of simple wireframes."

*Vib-Ribbon* had unlikely roots. *PaRappa The Rapper* and *UmJammer Lammy*, with their musical savvy and the marketable character designs of New York-based abstract painter Rodney Greenblat, had alerted advertising agencies to the potential of games in their work. Sony had been approached with an offer to build a game to market the Mercedes-Benz A-Class car; the German manufacturer hoped



At the end of courses, Vibri performs a celebratory song and a dance, the length of which depends on your performance

that a game would help its brand appeal to a younger audience. Sony offered the project to Matsuura's studio, NanaOn-Sha, and he and his team began to build a prototype, which featured a polygonal car pulsing down a road in time to the music, its headlights blinking like eyes.

## "WE DECIDED THAT THE BACKBONE OF THE GAME WOULD BE A CAR TRUNDLING ALONG A VISUALISATION"

The plan was to allow the player to use an external audio source, and for the audio data to be used to create the level design. "We decided that the backbone of the game would be a car trundling along a visualisation of the actual audio waveform," Matsuura says. "At the time, you could see examples of audio waveform visualisation in SGI's Csound program, which is where the idea originated."

The rest was simple: the player would, as in Matsuura's earlier games, hit one of four different buttons on the PlayStation controller in time with the music, responding to onscreen cues. Even so, the team faced near-insurmountable technical hurdles. "No matter how hard we tried, the connection between music and gameplay always seemed to end up ambiguous. We struggled so hard to get over this hurdle, and that was even before we began to think about how to reduce load times, create interest and

variety in the game courses, and introduce special set-pieces to appear based on specific intricacies in the music."

While *NanaOn-Sha* struggled with these technical problems, Mercedes-Benz was grappling with its own issues. The A-Class, which was in its final stages of development, faced public shame when it failed the elk (or moose) test, a journalist toppling the car when swerving at speed. The fault was serious, and required a redesign; as a result, the marketing game project was canned.

**Matsuura's team of** nine implored him to continue with the game, and the designer relented when one of his programmers made a breakthrough, discovering that it was possible to analyse a CD's waveform on PlayStation ahead of that music playing, negating the need for external hardware. And so the car's headlights morphed into the star-bright eyes of Vibri, the lithe, rangy rabbit seen in the final game, and the now-familiar wireframe look materialised. "The development was a total rollercoaster [ride]," Matsuura says. "There were so many happy days and so many sad days. We'd often work into the middle of the night."

Due to the game's unusual gestation process, and its numerous changes from its beginnings as an advergame into an experimental full release, *NanaOn-Sha* never formally presented the idea or documentation to Sony. "The game just kind of formed into what it is as we were developing it," Matsuura says. When Sony finally assigned the game a budget and a deadline, however, *NanaOn-Sha* failed to adhere to either. There was simply too much to pack in. "With *Vib-Ribbon*, it was important to me that the members of the development team were able to share their own personal ideas for the project," Matsuura says. "I feel that we incorporated each idea well into the game; in fact, it's the thing of which I am most proud. It was a complicated game to build, but actually things went very smoothly. By this stage, my staff and I had a clear idea about what our games were all about."

One team member's idea that Matsuura incorporated into the game was Vibri's visual evolution or devolution according to the player's performance. As the character struts along the ribbon, she is met by one of four different obstacle types: blocks, loops, waves and pits, later combined together. To clear each



impediment to her progress, the player must strike a corresponding button in time with the music, or perform combination presses for mixed obstacles. Keep perfect time for a while and Vibri will morph into a shimmering angel. Failures will result in devolutions, however: into a frog and then all the way down to her lowliest form, a worm. It's a theme subsequently echoed in games such as *Rez*, and provides a fable-like representation of decline and ascent, according to your aptitude.

**Just six songs** came on the disc itself. These, performed by Japanese group Laugh & Peace, were typical of the studio's output: idiosyncratic and unpredictable. Once these stages had been exhausted, the game's scope was as large as its player's CD collection, with the difficulty of each stage broadly dependent on the music's intensity.

In technical terms, the PlayStation analyses the CD's track eight seconds ahead of what is audible, allowing it to lay level in front of Vibri as if positioning track in front of an oncoming train. "The PlayStation was truly an all-in-one multimedia machine," Matsuura says. "We were able to use outside audio to produce in-game graphics, which the player would then react to in real time, creating a truly immersive audiovisual interactive experience. I think we achieved the smoothest iteration of this system that we possibly could. I doubt that we could achieve the same results with today's consoles or mobile devices."

Despite *Vib-Ribbon*'s apparent simplicity, a number of unforeseen issues had to be addressed. "We found that, because Vibri consists of a wireframe, when she is walking sideways, you could see both the eye on the screen-facing side of her head as well as the one in back," Matsuura recalls. "This didn't look too good, so we had to find a way to make only the eye in front visible." Likewise, when the player was able to use any piece of music they wanted to generate levels of any length, the designers had to find a score mechanism that would work for both simple, short pieces and complex, long ones. Matsuura tested the game with a sparse Brian Eno track, for instance, and the game failed to generate any obstacles at all for Vibri to tackle. "At certain points, Vibri calls out the players score. We had to decide on how many digits we might need for that system. Ten? A hundred? A thousand? Based on that decision, the structure of the song would need to be adjusted. There were many unexpected complications."

## Q&A

**Masaya Matsuura**  
Founder, NanaOn-Sha

**What was the most stressful time for you and the team during the development of *Vib-Ribbon*?**

Our office was in Meguro at the time. There were a few difficult crunch times, but even in those moments, the atmosphere among the team was fine. Everyone was able to exert his or her creativity. It didn't really feel like work – and I mean that in a good way. Luckily, I'm the type of personality that, once the project is completed, I just conveniently forget any stress involved.

**What did you hope players would take away from the game when they completed it?**

Throughout the project, my hope was that, through *Vib-Ribbon*, players would be able to discover a new way to enjoy music. That's the driving motivation behind all of my games.

**Considering you were experimenting with new technology to make *Vib-Ribbon*, did anything happen during the game's creation that you hadn't anticipated?**

During the game, there will be times when a fast [obstacle] piece will overtake a slow piece. This was originally a bug, but because it was cool, we left it in.

**Would you consider doing another *Vib-Ribbon* game?**

Rather than a sequel, first I would want to make something that takes advantage of the Internet. However, because music web technology is constantly evolving, it's difficult to know where to aim for.

The game sold around 100,000 copies in its week of release in Japan ("Unlike with *PaRappa The Rapper*, with *Vib-Ribbon* there were some hardcore fans right from the beginning"). But sales soon dropped off, and while the game was well received in Europe, it was never released in North America. For Matsuura, these figures don't equate to a commercial failure; rather, he views the game's comparatively modest success as appropriate for the game's untested and niche approach, and something that should be celebrated in its own way.

"*Vib-Ribbon* was never really a big hit in Japan," Matsuura says. "But I wonder if that matters, really? This culture of always feeling the need to make huge successes in the videogame

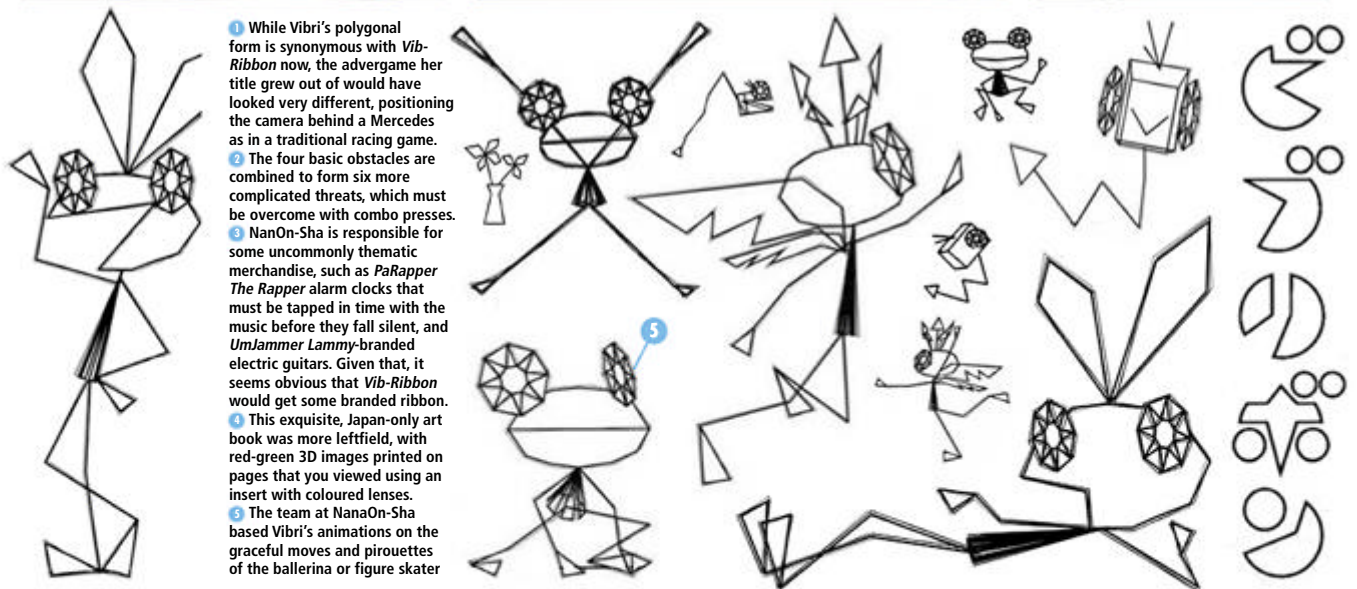
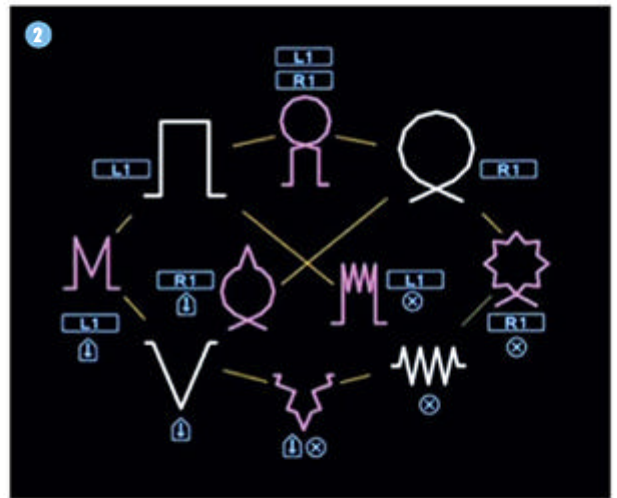


industry reminds me of the music industry in the '80s and '90s – at least in Japan, anyway. I feel that mindset can be dangerous. Back then, many of my colleagues in the music industry would say that we needed to support smaller artists who were able to sell records in the tens-of-thousands range... But in reality, that didn't happen; all of the focus went on the blockbuster artists. Look at what became of the music industry as a result. So in that sense, I think *Vib-Ribbon* was received in a very healthy fashion."

Despite its throwback aesthetic, *Vib-Ribbon* was released ahead of its time. The emergence of MP3s and, more recently, music streaming services has made it far easier for game developers to convert digital music into digital levels, as evidenced by the popularity of games such as Taito's *Groove Coaster* in Japan. "Of course, I would like to go back to *Vib-Ribbon* today and incorporate services like Spotify into the game," Matsuura says. But the designer also believes that it was the PlayStation hardware's unique restrictions that were responsible for the idea in the first place, the kind of conditions that are less likely to occur again today.

"In videogames, just when you think you've got the hardware all figured, something new always comes out," he says. "For us, it was the PlayStation 2. Thinking about it now, there were still so many things that we could have done with the original PlayStation. You could say that it's impossible to uncover everything that is truly possible with a console. By the time you figure out most of what can be done, some new hardware is just hitting the market. In a sense, the subsequent consoles spoiled things. Certainly once PlayStation 2 came out, it became all about man-hours and assigning people correctly; the process of game creation gradually became more and more stagnant as a result."

*Vib-Ribbon* heralded a temporary new direction for NanaOn-Sha. Three pseudo-sequels followed: generative *WonderSwan* riff *Rhyme Rider Kerorican*, the eccentric *Mojib-Ribbon*, which combined vocoder-strained rap music with calligraphy, and *Vib-Ripple*, which used digital images loaded into the game to generate levels. "I don't think any game-maker can truly know how their creation will turn out," Matsuura says. "That time revealed this truth to me: in videogames, you never know exactly what a game will become until you begin to make it. Anyone who claims otherwise is just pretending." ■



- 1 While Vibri's polygonal form is synonymous with *Vib-Ribbon* now, the advergame her title grew out of would have looked very different, positioning the camera behind a Mercedes as in a traditional racing game.
- 2 The four basic obstacles are combined to form six more complicated threats, which must be overcome with combo presses.
- 3 NanOn-Sha is responsible for some uncommonly thematic merchandise, such as *PaRappa The Rapper* alarm clocks that must be tapped in time with the music before they fall silent, and *UmJammer Lammy*-branded electric guitars. Given that, it seems obvious that *Vib-Ribbon* would get some branded ribbon.
- 4 This exquisite, Japan-only art book was more leftfield, with red-green 3D images printed on pages that you viewed using an insert with coloured lenses.
- 5 The team at NanaOn-Sha based Vibri's animations on the graceful moves and pirouettes of the ballerina or figure skater



STUDIO PROFILE

# KNAPNOK GAMES

The Copenhagen studio espousing  
the joys of collaboration –  
in both play and creation

By CHRIS SCHILLING



KnapNok founders (from  
left) Lau Korsgaard, Dajana  
Dimovska and Sebbe Selvig

On the face of it, Nintendo wouldn't appear to have much in common with KnapNok Games: one, after all, is an industry giant with a turnover in the multi-billions, while the other is a tiny independent developer based in the Danish capital. Yet the fact that the two enjoy a very healthy working relationship shouldn't come as a surprise. Formed within the Copenhagen Game Collective, a community that has been creating experimental games since 2008, the studio has always had a preference for tactile, physical play and unorthodox control schemes. Wii U, then, has become a very natural home for its inventive, exploratory output. You could argue that not even Nintendo has tapped the potential of the GamePad quite as well as KnapNok.

**Lau Korsgaard**, the studio's creative director, says KnapNok is naturally drawn to technology that invites developers to consider alternative solutions. "Whether you're playing around with VR or Kinect or whatever, they all force you to think about game ideas that aren't necessarily centred on, say, pushing a button to jump. There's this whole space of interactions and gameplay that hasn't been explored. A lot of games are controlled in very much the same way, so new interfaces are fascinating."

It's a fascination that began in 2008, as a group of game design and technology students formed the Copenhagen Game Collective. "It wasn't like a company," Korsgaard recalls. "It was a group trying out different experiments. We built a bunch of social, physical party game prototypes, and at some point we started to realise we could make a company out of this." A subset of that original group joined forces, and was awarded a grant by the Danish Film Institute to start making commercial games. KnapNok was born, but it wasn't the only studio that grew out of the collective. Korsgaard and **Dajana Dimovska** also worked with **Douglas Wilson** and **Nils Deneken**, who went on to found Die Gute Fabrik, creator of event favourite and party classic *Johann Sebastian Joust*.

It was an exciting time for Korsgaard and Dimovska, KnapNok's CEO. The collective had brought together people with common interests in an unstructured environment that encouraged creativity and spontaneity. Early game ideas explored the space between the physical and digital worlds, though as groups naturally formed within the collective, projects became less like art installations and something more akin to traditional games. "We started turning it into



Developed within the collective, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* is almost as fun to watch, a party game that feels most at home at events

real work and business," Dimovska explains.

"We wanted to take it to the next level."

Though KnapNok has been plenty busy in the years since, the collective remains: Korsgaard and Dimovska are members of a 12-strong core. "There are some things companies are good at, like paying people salaries and so on," he explains. "But there are other things a collective can do better, like arranging an exhibition in a gallery or throwing a party at GDC." KnapNok's offices are very central in Copenhagen, which

## "THERE'S THIS WHOLE SPACE OF INTERACTIONS AND GAMEPLAY THAT HASN'T BEEN EXPLORED"

makes it an ideal meeting place for the collective, and although it's still an environment that fosters imagination and individuality, the group is more organised, with a board that makes key decisions. "But the structure is still very loose," Dimovska says. "Any individuals in the collective can run a project or call up a meeting, and there are a few events we've been involved with for years, like the w00t Festival or the Nordic Game Indie Night. We want to keep it alive, not only for the core members, but maintaining it for future generations. We're still defining a lot of the things that are happening, but hopefully that will continue through new recruits from the area."

It's an initiative that couldn't have existed without support from Denmark's creative industries, and Korsgaard agrees that the country has good support systems for startups and experimental projects, although he admits it's harder to get funding for more substantial, costly endeavours. "At that stage, you just have to get your shii together!" he laughs. "As a country it's amazing for very personal artistic projects,"



**Founded** 2009  
**Employees** 12  
**Key staff** Dajana Dimovska (CEO), Lau Korsgaard (Creative Director)  
**URL** [www.knapnogames.com](http://www.knapnogames.com)  
**Selected softography** *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, *Spin The Bottle: Bumpie's Party*, *Affordable Space Adventures*  
**Current projects** TBA

Dimovska adds, "but if you want to turn that into a business and attract investment, then you have to look elsewhere." Denmark has few publishers or investors interested in gaming, though the Danish Film Institute has helped get some KnapNok projects off the ground. They treat games like films: both mediums are considered an important part of the country's culture. "I think it's rare for games to be treated like that in other countries," Dimovska tells us. "It's not quite the same as film when it comes to funding, because Danish cinema has a much longer tradition, but it's getting better and better. They have a better understanding of games each year."

Indeed, the institute's New Danish Screen program provided the funding for KnapNok's first

major project, *Tryl*, a multiplayer-focused Wii game in which players cast spells at one another using Remote gestures. It was subsequently shelved as another of the studio's experiments, Xbox Live Indie Game and IGF finalist *Brutally Unfair Tactics Totally OK Now* (*B.U.T.T.O.N.* for short), was attracting more attention and thus seemed more commercially viable. Also released on PC, *B.U.T.T.O.N.* enjoyed cult recognition for its highly physical multiplayer, with players encouraged to use underhand strategies to prevent their opponents from winning by reaching the controller and holding down a button.

For Dimovska, it made sense from both a creative and a business standpoint for KnapNok to find its own niche, at a time when games such as *Guitar Hero*, along with Nintendo's Wii, were challenging the mainstream perception of games. "As developers we came out of a university and hobbyist background rather than a traditional game industry context, so that made things easier. We saw this opportunity with all these new technologies coming out, to work our way ►



## STUDIO PROFILE



There's something of a game jam spirit at KnapNok, Korsgaard tells us. "We like employees to have that outlet of working on weird things that might never turn into commercial products. Just cool ideas that are interesting to explore"

into a space that nobody had really tapped into yet." In other words, KnapNok's unique selling point was simply that it was unique. "We may not be the best graphic artists or programmers, but our core appeal is being different."

More prototypes followed: IGF entrant *Slowmo Showdown* was a motion-based one-on-one fighting game for Kinect, while *Panzer Geekz* was a physics-powered racing game designed for mobile devices. But it was 2013's *Spin The Bottle: Bumpie's Party* on Wii U that brought KnapNok to a wider audience. An often ingenious showcase for its disruptive host hardware, it invited players to turn the TV off and focus on the smaller screen, while pressing Wii Remote buttons with their noses and spinning around to power a motion-controlled drill. "Because you don't have to look at a static TV you can move around the small screen, sit in a circle around it or whatever," Korsgaard says. "It breaks up the social structure of the play space much more. We'd suddenly found a way of commercially releasing those social, awkward party games we'd worked on for many years. Somehow finding an audience with that was really great."

There's more than a hint of idealism in its creative approach. KnapNok's mission is to make games that invite people to physically interact, by talking, looking, and touching one another. "We want to bring that type of fun back," Korsgaard explains. "That's the way we've played games for centuries. There's nothing wrong with being online or being immersed in a singleplayer-only game, but we definitely prefer the kind of experience that involves other people."

KnapNok's games to date are very much products of the environment in which they were created, reflecting the social structure of a group of developers that simply "likes to hang out", as **Nicklas Nygren** puts it. The Swedish designer,

best known for the *Knytt* series, has worked with KnapNok before, contributing music to *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, but Wii U game *Affordable Space Adventures* is much more of a joint effort. It's been an eye-opening transition for him. "I mainly made singleplayer games when I lived in Sweden, partly because I didn't really know a lot of game developers up there. But after I moved to Denmark and started to meet up with a lot of other developers, that's where I got into local multiplayer, and also by playing and making those kinds of games in game jams."

Though Nygren and KnapNok had very different design backgrounds, the partnership blossomed, and each began to influence the

"We've been featured in The Washington Post, The Independent, Forbes," Korsgaard says. "All these big media outlets we haven't been able to reach before." And the secret of its success? "It's an interesting game to write about."

That's true, and it's also a sign of a company aiming to broaden its range. For the time being, KnapNok is clearly happy to work with Nintendo, and the feeling is evidently reciprocated, though Dimovska suggests that it's looking into collaborating with others on bigger projects, including a pending partnership that could see the studio further explore opportunities within the physical as well as the digital space. "We have plans to work with VR

### "WE MAY NOT BE THE BEST GRAPHIC ARTISTS OR PROGRAMMERS, BUT OUR CORE APPEAL IS BEING DIFFERENT"

other. On one hand, the game represented a step into more challenging, technical territory for the studio; on the other, Nygren happily admits the threeplayer co-operative mode was entirely KnapNok's work. Its origins are typically exceptional: it was conceived from an offhand remark made during a session of *Nintendoland*, a game that had been on regular rotation during the studio's early weeks with the hardware as it considered the strengths and weaknesses of Wii U's idiosyncratic setup. "We asked ourselves: 'What would the best game for this console be?'" Dimovska remembers. "Nicklas said: 'Piloting a spaceship with a computer on the GamePad'. It was just a joke we made in the living room, but we kept building upon it until it was a real thing." It's the studio's biggest hit so far – if not in sales figures, then certainly in terms of column inches.

and AR and hybrid games and digital board games," she tells us. "We're definitely aiming to attack that space a little more."

If that means working directly with a larger publisher, so be it. Either way, Dimovska is confident that KnapNok can leave its individual stamp on whatever it does. "Every single game we've made has been a collaboration with someone. Whoever we work with and spread the risk with, we believe each production will have our own flavour." It's an attitude that, again, was born within that original collective: everyone was treated as an individual, but ideas were always shared; every project was different, but all had the same ethos – that philosophy of inclusiveness, invention, physical sensation and collaborative spirit. "We're not changing," Dimovska says. "We're evolving." ■



1 There's a hint of *WarioWare* in *B.U.T.T.O.N.*, not just in its minigames, but its characterful art design, too. It was a finalist in 2011's Independent Games Festival awards in the Nuovo Award category.

2 Nygren's original idea for *Affordable Space Adventures* was inspired by Capcom's *Steel Battalion*, a game he admits he still hasn't played: "It came with this crazy-huge custom controller, which made me want to create a similarly technical game that gave you a sense of operating a vehicle."

3 The simple characters of *Spin The Bottle: Bumpie's Party* add to the appeal, but not nearly as much as a willingness to embarrass yourself. Such is its desire to focus on your fellow player that it initially asks you to turn the TV off





# PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

## STILL PLAYING

### **Dark Souls II: Scholar Of The First Sin** PS4

Making the player's life easy is hardly central to FromSoftware's design ethos, but that doesn't always mean opening a booby-trapped chest or being slung into a dirty sack: this month we tried to set up *DSII* co-op with friends. Even with Soul Levels calibrated and Name-Engraved Rings set to the same god, making contact in the game still proved to be a boss-sized challenge. Perhaps we're destined to play only with strangers for the rest of eternity.

### **Hearthstone: Heroes Of Warcraft**, iOS

Blizzard's card battler thuds onto iPhone, becoming our go-to balm for night-time interruptions from the lungs of the youngest of the **Edge** brood by filling the waits while they resettle. Maybe it's the sleep deprivation, or the Flamestrike mages, but the Arena has become an even bloodier trial than we remember. Still, that only makes it all the more satisfying when we lead a mech-heavy Warrior deck on a win streak as the sun climbs over the horizon.

### **Outrun 2006: Coast To Coast** PC

Not everyone is a petrolhead, clearly. It's a tough time for fans of the arcade racer: these days, racing games are made for people who'd rather tinker with torque than drift round a hairpin at a ludicrous 90-degree angle. To many, though, the better use of modern processing grunt is playing Sega's glorious racer at an eyeball-melting 4K resolution. Beautiful.



Import games provided for review by Hong Kong store [www.play-asia.com](http://www.play-asia.com)

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# Financial simulation

Publicly traded publishers have an obligation to deliver the maximum possible profit to shareholders. At one end of the budgetary spectrum, this means spending big on a lavishly produced game aimed at a wide audience. At the other, a free-to-play game designed to reel in, and retain, as large a group as possible. The simulator fits in nowhere on this scale. That's not stopped big companies from trying, but a style of game where accuracy trumps spectacle is a hard sell. It's all risk, with little prospect of reward.

For the big publishers, at least. Crowdfunding has proved that long-forgotten genres retain their appeal and can still be financially viable. Slightly Mad Studios has made *Project Cars* (p106) with the help of 80,000 players who want a full-blown racing sim. The studio is serving a very different sort of stakeholder: its controversial funding model means early backers are also investors.

*Kerbal Space Program* (p102) meanwhile, reaches version 1.0 this month, though you've been able to buy a copy for the past four years. This, like *Project Cars*, is a game funded and shaped by a passionate community, and it's resulted in a wonderful sim that's made a fan of NASA. Had we not known about it since 2011, we'd be calling it the most pleasant surprise of the year so far.

So, at first glance, *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (p98) might look like the most conventional game of the month, but the reality is very different. It was made with neither publisher support nor interference, by a Polish indie studio funded in part by takings from its sister outfit, PC download service GOG. It's a risky move from a company that's been close to the wall in the past, but just further proof that stuffy investors are no longer the only tenable route to market – and that's good news for us all.





# The Witcher III: Wild Hunt

Come on, CD Projekt, not all of us are blessed with superpowers. Geralt Of Rivia may be able to track man, beast and ghost across the Northern Kingdoms with his Witcher Senses – picking up their scents and blood trails, following in their footsteps – but even he would struggle to identify the tiny text and icons on his new game’s UI. Few things betray a PC developer unaccustomed to the needs of the console player quite like an unscaled interface, and so it proves here, with menus and flavour text designed to be viewed from 18 inches presented as-is to those sitting ten feet from the screen. *The Witcher? The Squinter*, more like.

In fairness, CD Projekt has had other, more pressing concerns in making *The Witcher III* for consoles. This is a studio, and a series, with a reputation for taxing even the most powerful PCs; this, however, is the first game the studio has ever made multiplatform at launch, and as such it cannot delegate to the player the job of tinkering with settings to find the sweet spot between visual quality and performance. The results, on PS4 at least, are predictably uneven, with some conspicuous pop-in and a framerate that tops out at 30fps and frequently dips far south of that. Such moments are easier to forgive since they are the result of a developer with its heart in the right place, refusing to compromise on a few core principles: 1080p resolution, dense swaying foliage, dramatic shifts in weather conditions, and the biggest drain, dynamic lighting. Taverns are among the worst offenders, where the clusters of candles on every table mean the engine buckles under the strain of half-a-dozen light sources too many. Out in the wilderness, carrying a torch has similar effect; elsewhere, clouds of particles – the poisonous fog in Crookback Bog, for instance – will hit performance hard. CD Projekt continues its optimisation efforts (a day-one patch has improved, though far from eradicated, such issues) but its reputation as a studio of remarkable technical prowess has been tarnished a little, however noble its intentions.

In all other respects the developer’s reputation is intact, even improved. *The Witcher III* may be CD Projekt’s first open-world game, but the Northern Kingdoms exhibit a level of craft and care in their design that belies their creator’s lack of experience. This world is vast and teeming with things to do, but it never feels cluttered or leaves you with the sense that a sidequest or village has been arbitrarily dropped into place for fear of you getting lost or bored. Indeed, getting lost is almost encouraged: wander off and you’ll inevitably stumble across someone, or something, in need of a helping hand or a blade to the stomach, but such moments feel organic and unforced. Where other developers riddle their maps with icons, CD Projekt is restrained and respectful, with only the most important marked permanently on the map. Arriving in Novigrad,

**Publisher/developer** CD Projekt  
**Format** PC, PS4 (version tested),  
Xbox One  
**Release** Out now

The world is the work of a studio that believes in trusting the player and you feel a deeper connection to it as a result

the game’s major city, with our swords and gear in sore need of repair, we had to wander the streets in search of an armourer, since such map icons only shows up when you draw near. On repeated visits, we had to retrace our steps and, eventually, would learn the route by heart (along the harbourside, turn right after the pub, left after the bank, then follow your nose). A minimap breadcrumb trail guides you through quests – although it, like much of the UI, can be turned off – but on the whole, the world is the work of a studio that believes in trusting the player, not patronising them, and you feel a deeper connection to this land as a result.

Similarly, *The Witcher III*’s combat system presents you with a wealth of possibilities then lets you decide the extent to which you want to engage with it all. Potions and decoctions, brewed from ingredients found out in the wild, give temporary buffs; oils increase damage against specific types of enemies. Geralt can also cast Signs, magical spells that set enemies on fire, slow or stun them. Almost everything can be upgraded, and a sprawling skill tree offers significant build diversity, allowing you to focus on alchemy, Signs, combat or a broad spread of all three.

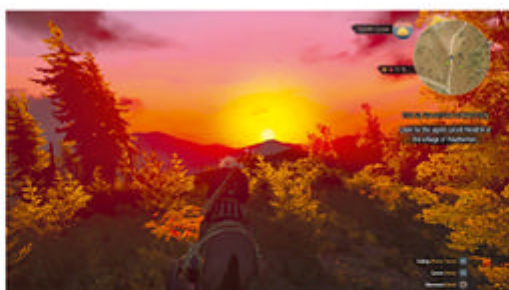
**Combat is often** where games of this type fall down, yet while *The Witcher III* is hardly *Dark Souls*, its swordplay is a few quick cuts above that offered by most of its peers. The FromSoftware comparison is an apt one, in fact: with a short, sharp dash to dodge; a longer, slower evasive roll; light and strong attacks; and a parry that’s mapped to the left trigger, there’s an unmistakable whiff of *Bloodborne* to the game’s combat. Mobs are smarter than the average RPG lot, too, hanging back rather than guilelessly charging in, working as a unit to try to surround you – and if you should get penned in, you won’t last long. Right from the off, enemies hit hard, and the healing system is built around using potions and food to slowly regenerate health, rather than immediately restore it, making it hard to turn a bad situation around. The solution is one of careful, patient play, controlling space and waiting for an opening before exploiting it rapidly and brutally. Steaming in and mashing buttons is, even on the default Sword And Story difficulty, simply asking for trouble, and that’s a request the Northern Kingdom’s bandits, beasts and spectres are only too happy to honour.

It is the sort of system around which entire games are built, yet it is used uncommonly sparingly here: there’s still plenty of combat, of course, but it’s used as a change of pace or a punctuation mark for quests that are designed more around walking and talking than hacking and slashing. Witcher Contract sidequests will involve a lengthy period of research – identifying the beast in question by talking to locals and examining corpses, then preparing for battle and tracking it back ▶





**LEFT** Weapons and armour degrade over time, and aren't cheap to fix. It's a particular problem early on, when funds are scarce. Higher-level gear is more durable, but the economy remains finely balanced throughout: at one point late on, we barely had enough for a beer. **BELOW** Sailing is introduced reasonably late on, when you set off for Skellige, a cluster of islands that see the game at its prettiest. Its inhabitants all have Irish accents; elsewhere, you'll find a varied mix of assorted UK dialects



**ABOVE** As in *Red Dead Redemption* – an obvious touchstone – whistling for your horse, Roach, sees it spawn in a few yards away. Riding works similarly, too: hold X on a path and your steed holds course automatically



The Northern Kingdoms are blustery, and Geralt's hair rarely sits still – an effect that is more pronounced on PC, thanks to Nvidia's HairWorks tech. His beard, meanwhile, grows as time passes





to its lair – and you’ll spend most of the main story crisscrossing that enormous world map in your search for a singular, elusive quarry.

A little too elusive, in fact. The search is for Ciri, the girl to whom Geralt served as protector, mentor and surrogate father in previous games in the series. Now she’s an adult and in possession of a potentially world-conquering power, so she’s on the run from the titular Wild Hunt, a marauding spectral army that has sent her scurrying from one remote bolthole to another. Geralt’s search for her is long, meandering and at times a bit boring, involving chasing down one lead after another, each insisting on your assistance before giving up information on where it might be worth heading next. One extended series of quests to reunite Geralt with one of many returning characters ends hours later with them shrugging and saying, “I thought she was with you.” As fan service, it’s an effective method of giving a cast of likeable former allies a role in proceedings, but it’s protracted and unsatisfying, the promise of yet another ten-hour thread leading to nothing providing little incentive to push on.

That instead comes instead from a finely written, and for the most part well-voiced, script that is carried wonderfully well, even in its flatter moments, by Geralt himself. At first seeming dry, cold and a little flat in his delivery, he is in fact a character of considerable nuance, a deadpan, often sarcastic hero who is far more emotionally involved in proceedings than he lets on. We’d be pretty sour if we had to deal with the sort of things that cross his path, too, and we don’t just mean the things that want to see him dead. Decisions, some of seemingly minor importance, can have dire consequences. The impact can take time to manifest,



#### LADY PARTS

Much has been made of CD Projekt’s often questionable treatment of the fairer sex, and results here are mixed. Geralt is surrounded by powerful, independent women with their own motivations, sure, but the odd impractically wide neckline, or bare midriff in a snowstorm, can suggest that the costume designers are scheming against the scriptwriters. Meanwhile, Ciri has a habit of arriving in cutscenes arse-first. One hoary cliché is finely subverted, at least: Ciri may be cast as the damsel, but she’s playable in a handful of chapters and is the most powerful force in the game, putting Geralt’s broad toolset to shame with just a handful of moves. Old habits die hard, then, but CD Projekt has clearly come a long way since the first game’s sexual-conquest card collection.

Ciri’s journey is told through cutscenes and brief playable sections. While she seems vulnerable at first, she grows in power; a Blink move teleports her behind each enemy onscreen in succession for a stream of one-hit kills

or transpire in a heartbeat, and choices are rarely clear-cut. There is no Paragon and Rogue here, just Shit and Shitter; you decide not who to save, but simply who comes off the least worst. Little wonder Geralt often gives off the impression he would rather be somewhere else. He knows what’s coming.

**Open-world games** are typically exercises in forgiveness, of excusing some humdrum or outright broken component parts because of the scale and scope of the whole. In a way, *The Witcher III* is no exception, though the balance here is tipped firmly in favour of the functional, so it demands less forgiveness than most. CD Projekt has already improved performance, and will continue to do so. The narrative’s pace is uneven early on, but once Ciri is finally found, things pick up considerably, with some fine set-pieces and, in between, a series of missions with real meaning and purpose. Elsewhere there’s a decent script driven by a likeable cast, a satisfying, flexible combat system, and a couple of hundred hours of content set across a colossal, often beautiful, believable world that’s packed – but not *too* packed – with adventure. Appropriately for a game inspired by a series of novels, there’s a little twinge of sadness when *The Witcher III*’s credits roll, like saying goodbye to a good book. Fortunately, there are dozens more stories still to be told, hidden away in its forests, atop its mountains, deep below its seas. For a witcher, the story never ends. We brew up some potions, sharpen our swords, and head back out into the wilderness, where the hunt begins anew.

## Post Script

Interview: **Damien Monnier**, senior gameplay designer; **Pawel Sasko**, senior quest designer

**W**hen we speak to senior gameplay designer **Damien Monnier** and senior quest designer **Pawel Sasko**, it's the day of *The Witcher III*'s release. There's no sound of popping champagne corks in the background, however; the game may be out in the wild now, but the team is hard at work on its DLC and monitoring forums for launch-day technical issues. Here, we discuss the philosophies and design decisions behind the creation of a remarkable open world.

### What's the secret to making a believable world?

**Damien Monnier** The first thing we did was create a Living World team to work closely with the Location guys. Location started by creating mountains and lakes in places that made sense. Then they'd look at where villages would go. They'd do their research, understand the criteria that peasants in Medieval times would use to decide where to build villages and settlements. Then the Living World team kicks in, populating the village, then placing everything around it, and that's where things get tricky. When is it too much? When is it not enough? We knew we wanted a system that was organic, and that means you can't hard-script things. It took a lot of prototyping. We'd have people around the office playing and one would say, "I haven't seen anything for 20 minutes," and we'd know we had a problem.

### So it was all done by feel? You weren't tempted to use data to handle it?

**DM** We didn't want to create a system that would check that sort of stuff. 'Have you seen a monster in the last 20 minutes? If not, then we're going to force one to spawn.' That's not what we wanted. The system now is the result of so many iterations — every single area, every single monster, made and placed by hand.

**Pawel Sasko** The important thing to add to that is that along the way we failed many times [laughs]. To be honest, I still can't say if we got it right; we did everything we could to make sure the player was never bored, but not overwhelmed.

### A game based so heavily on choice invites repeat playthroughs, which is unusual for an open-world game. Did that affect the world, or quest design?

**PS** We don't really want players to do that. We want the player to make a choice and stick to it.

### You must understand people won't do that, though, especially since the consequences of some decisions don't become clear until much later.

**PS** Yes, and that's intentional. We wanted to reflect a bit of the uncertainty we have in life. We don't always know how our choices will affect our lives.



Damien Monnier, senior gameplay designer



Pawel Sasko, senior quest designer

**"We wanted to reflect a bit of the uncertainty in life. We don't always know how our choices will affect our lives"**

**DM** I see the game as an adventure. It's about your story — it's a roleplaying game. This is what happened to you, now talk to your friends and see how it differs.

### The economy is tightly balanced to ensure you're never too well off. How did you maintain that?

**DM** It's very difficult! We didn't want Geralt to be this multimillionaire that just goes around killing monsters. Ultimately, he does it for money; we really wanted you to try to haggle over prices and get more, because you really need the money.

**PS** In the books, Geralt was very poor; he was always struggling for money. It was one of the cool things we wanted to keep. There are a lot of funny stories about our economy. A QA tester came to us like, "I'm level ten, and I have 6,000 gold and have nothing to spend it on," and we had to work out what happened. We'd left a door unlocked to a big villa — he'd robbed it and sold all these expensive swords.

### The XP payout for monsters is small, as if you're pushing people away from combat for combat's sake.

**PS** You get more XP from quests, yes. For us, this made it easier to see how player progression would work — how powerful a player was going to be [for any given quest]. It was also to prevent you just sitting in the bushes killing wolves, turning the game into a boring grind. You do get a little XP [for kills], and the more powerful the monster, the more you'll get, but mainly the experience points you get are from quests. And there are 280 of them, so...

### You chose to not have enemies scale to your level, which is always a contentious decision. Was there much debate about it internally?

**DM** It was unanimous. I don't even think there was a meeting about it, because everybody wanted it, this feeling of becoming a better player. Not only do you get better skills and weapons [as you progress], but you become better at playing the game. The creature that was giving you trouble, you go back to it and absolutely destroy it, and you feel great. That would be lost if you went back to that creature to find it had levelled up as well. It doesn't mean it's going to be super-easy when you're level 40, but it really adds to your sense of achievement. You really feel like time has passed: you've been in this world a while, your beard grows, you become better as a player... It's really cool, I think.

**PS** The player can always beat a harder opponent. Even when you're level one in the prologue, you can take on wraiths that are level seven and you can beat them. It's perfectly possible, even on the harder difficulties, and it's really rewarding when you do it. ■



# Kerbal Space Program

**K**erbal Space Program is a game about going up and only getting so far. This is a comfortable template for a videogame, one that maps success and failure along a readily understandable axis – altitude – and hands the player a broad set of powers with which to push that number higher, higher and higher. It could, and does, work simply as a puzzle game, but *KSP* offers more than that. This is a rare example of a simulation-driven sandbox that operates equally as a game, as a creative construction tool, and as a thought-provoking encounter with history.

You are put in charge of a space agency on an Earth-like planet called Kerbin, populated by grinning green Kerbals whose only desire is to be rocketed into the cosmos. Your open-ended task is to design spacecraft with the goal of matching or exceeding the achievements of real rocket science. Your tools come in the form of modular parts that can be assembled with a tremendous degree of freedom, allowing you to both replicate real rockets and try out experimental designs of your own. Your success or failure is determined according to real rocketry principles: while its physics model isn't a perfect match for reality, it's close enough to pose a severe challenge for most people.

Getting into space, it turns out, is difficult. Balancing fuel payloads, engine power and stability is essential to achieve the requisite lift, and knowing what to do with that lift means developing an understanding of concepts like delta-v and the difference between a retrograde and a prograde burn. Simply seeing space will amount to your first major achievement. After that comes orbit, then orbital transfers. Then you might pull off a moon landing. You might even get your Kerbals home again. Beyond that? Build a space station. Beat NASA to *KSP*'s version of Mars. It's up to you.

This 1.0 release comes after four years in paid-for alpha and beta, a long and open development cycle that has benefited the game tremendously. The release version improves the game's atmospheric physics model and introduces female Kerbals alongside a range of subtler tweaks – but what it doesn't do is make the game any more accessible. The steep learning challenge is something that requires a willingness to dive into wikis, guides, even essays on orbital physics. This needn't be a bad thing: in fact, it highlights the game's unique strength, which is that it offers you a chance to learn something about the world. NASA uses it as a teaching tool for a reason. On the other hand, learning takes time and that will be an obstacle for some.

That said, failure is punished lightly and you are always given the option to rewind to the assembly stage unless you specifically disable it. What could be a rather grim or dry experience – assembling multi-stage rockets, considering transit windows, screwing up and losing astronauts – is helped by *KSP*'s cheeriness and

**Publisher/developer** Squad  
**Format** PC  
**Release** Out now

What could be a rather grim or dry experience is helped by *KSP*'s cheeriness and general irreverence



## PROPS DUE

*Kerbal Space Program*'s modding community has four years of experience with the game, and it shows. Additions over that time range from bug fixes to physics tweaks to bundles of new modules that add entirely new building disciplines to the game. With the Kerbal Aircraft Expansion, *KSP* becomes a game about building and flying traditional prop-driven planes and helicopters. This hooks into the core game as much or as little as you'd like it to. Think you can give your prototype spaceplane a kickstart by ferrying it into the stratosphere on the back of a heavy cargo plane? Then go for it. You'll need to learn how aircraft work first, however – and the game's fundamental respect for the actual laws of real physics is held in high regard by the community.

general irreverence. Kerbals grin in the face of almost everything. Their waddling gait mirrors the precarious craft you build for them. They're happy to be there. It's this that not only makes the game accessible to adults but opens the door for children to enjoy it too.

**There are three** principle ways to approach the game. In Sandbox mode, all components are unlocked from the beginning and the only challenge you need to overcome is your own lack of understanding of how to use them. This is both the best way to learn and in some senses the most daunting, as it's easy to overreach yourself. Career mode sits at the opposite end of the spectrum, a full-blown management mode that tasks you with building up your agency's funding, reputation and research resources, and using these to expand your base, pay for each rocket launch, and unlock new components by progressing along a tech tree. While being drip-fed new ideas may help newcomers, Career ultimately feels like a challenge aimed at experienced players. Getting into orbit is hard enough as it is, without limited funds and suboptimal gear. Science mode, finally, sits between the two, asking you to gather research to unlock components, but applying few other restrictions to what you can do.

Each of these modes works as a game in its own right. It's a question of picking the context within which you want to encounter the game's core challenge: that ever-present drive to reach higher, to do more. This additional layer of player agency further emphasises the need to approach the game with a guide of some kind available, but it compounds the sense that this is a hobby waiting to be shaped into a form that suits you.

The magic of *Kerbal Space Program*, however, is not just that it manages to be both a game and a simulation, a high-level educational tool and something that is fun to simply sit and tinker with. It's that, in combination, these qualities allow for a connection with real history and real human achievement. Your achievements in the game stem from legitimate advancements in your understanding of physics, and this in turn tends naturally towards a deeper understanding of the effort it took to produce these feats of engineering in real life. The feeling of precarious isolation created by a deep-space orbital transfer. The horror of watching a grinning Kerbal spiral out into the black. The faintly romantic realisation that it is easier to accidentally create an ICBM than it is to deliberately create a lunar lander.

It's in these moments when *Kerbal Space Program* transcends its rudimentary visual design and becomes beautiful. Its ultimate promise to the player is something that few games offer: not that you'll crack a puzzle that has been set by a designer, but that you'll crack a puzzle set by *reality*. That's a hell of a reason to keep pushing upwards.



**ABOVE** When a design fails, it's up to you to figure out why. Sometimes, as here, the issue might be obvious – too much weight, and a weak coupling that gravity doesn't like. At other times, the problem can be more obscure.

**LEFT** In addition to building rockets, you also plan out a series of key stages – detaching booster rockets, activating secondary thrusters, and so on – to match the journey you plan. There's drama in watching a good plan unfold



**BELOW** Once in a new location, there's a lot you can do to maximise your science points. Taking samples and preparing crew reports can be enhanced if you build a lander with room for a lab



**ABOVE** Damage like this will need to be repaired at a cost to your agency's funding. If you play without the quickload option, this creates hard punishments for reckless design. If it falls over and blows up, you bought it







NASA's Asteroid Redirect Mission won't be over until the 2020s. It's a stepping stone to putting human beings on Mars

## Post Script

### Moving educational games back into mainstream orbit

NASA's involvement with *Kerbal Space Program* began innocuously enough, with a single tweet inviting the game's developers and fans to check out the space agency's plan to redirect a small asteroid into lunar orbit within the next decade. A year after that tweet, in April 2014, *KSP* received the *Asteroid Redirect Mission*: a NASA-endorsed mini-expansion that challenged players to replicate the goals of the real mission within the game, using parts and principles directly sourced from NASA. This included parts like the Launch Escape System, a micro-booster designed to save crews from malfunctioning rockets by forcibly ejecting the command pod and its parachutes away from the body of the craft at an angle.

NASA's involvement allowed serious-minded players to meet the challenges imposed by real spaceflight. This included treating their hapless Kerbal pilots as precious resources to be protected, not grinning green expendables to be stranded in orbit if it came to it (of course, this remained an option). In return, NASA received a surge of attention for one of its most ambitious missions, and exposure to a vast young audience through the game's success on Steam.

This seems like an inversion of the natural order. After all, the prominence of the space

travel fantasy in games traces back to the real space race. It was the advent of human space flight, and NASA's accomplishments in the '60s, that placed this notion at the centre of the collective consciousness. Without NASA, there's no *Elite*. *Mass Effect*'s lead is named after Alan Shepard, the first man NASA sent into space. It seems strange that the agency should turn to the media it inspired to drum up support for future endeavours.

Yet that's the world we live in. NASA faces a pressing political and practical need to create interest in space travel, particularly among the young. Influencing policy and inspiring a groundswell of public support to shore up against funding cuts is one aspect of this. Another, arguably far more important, aspect is the need to create a new generation of astrophysicists. It's here that *KSP* provides a unique opportunity – not just to tell players about NASA's work, but to teach them the fundamental principles that make it possible.

No other medium could offer this, and it demonstrates what a special proposition *KSP* is as both a game and a tool. Its mix of easy charm, creative freedom and scientific rigour makes it able to humanise the work of human space flight, and bring it within aspirational reach of young people who might not have considered astrophysics otherwise.

There are caveats, of course. *KSP*'s physics model is full of subtle inaccuracies, and there are limits to its powers as a simulation. Real rocket scientists do not need to account for the 'kraken' and 'Cthulhu' bugs, since quirks within *KSP* can cause rockets to disassemble themselves under extreme conditions. Nor does the assembly system account for the process of invention. This is a game about bolting together parts, not coming up with the concept of a gimballed rocket engine.

Yet it's close enough – and far closer than any other presentation of spaceflight in popular media. In order to place a rocket in orbit around Kerbin, players are required to learn the process by which this really happens, the sorts of things that can go wrong, and, crucially, that it is possible to succeed.

The game is a bridge – not just between players and NASA, but between learning and gaming. For a generation who grew up surrounded by the thin and uninspiring educational games of the '80s and '90s, this is something of a deprecated concept. The potential for games to inspire real social and scientific change by adopting an educational role is a notion worth rescuing from the 'edutainment' label, and the image of disappointed children faced with a grinning Mavis Beacon on December 25. ■

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# Project Cars

Developers so often talk about the cars in their games handling the way you want them to, rather than the way they really would if you threw them at a stretch of Californian highway with videogame abandon. Slightly Mad Studios faces that same delicate compromise with rigorous, full-blooded motorsport sim *Project Cars* – creating an entertaining impression of its vehicles, rather than a forensic recreation of their physical properties – but make no mistake, there's no menu-option alchemy to turn this into an arcade racer.

This is a game for those familiar with toe-in angles, and who know the braking points of many international circuits by rote. In fact, it's a kind of paradise for sim enthusiasts, bristling with rousing combinations of locations, vehicles and handling models with their own eccentricities. Even if there were no career path here, you'd still clock more than enough mileage from experiments such as letting an Audi R18 TDI Le Mans prototype loose on the narrow, undulating tarmac at Oulton Park, or filling the spray-painted, storied turns of the Nordschleife with 45 Ford Capris and watching the fireworks from your own stripped-down cockpit.

There is, however, a traditional singleplayer progression path in the form of Career mode. The pace of your progression from spongy production cars and tinnitus-inducing karting formulas up to LMP 1 and Formula A (F1 in all but licensing) is determined by the tier you choose to enter at and your results in each season. Start way down at tier eight and you should prepare yourself for many a race weekend spent at the wheel of a 125cc kart. Skip a few tiers and you'll be commanding open wheelers and GT3 racers down the main straight at 180mph within a racing season. Either route offers a satisfying progression curve, but the zero-to-hero path yields the bigger reward in the form of an understanding of each distinct racing category.

Here you'll find the thrilling heart of *Project Cars*: its physics. It isn't just that you can feel where a car's weight is distributed as you wrestle it through an S-bend, or that you're allowed such precise feedback on wheels locking up under braking. It isn't even that these subtleties are conveyed so adeptly through a controller, not just via a force-feedback wheel. It's in the profound, tangible differences in these behaviours that you can feel from car to car. A Pagani Zonda R wants a different touch on the brakes to a Merc A-Class, naturally, but so does its similarly powered German cousin, the BMW M1 Coupé. For fans of the sport and the genre, that breadth of automotive challenge is enough on its own.

The rigour, no-frills presentation and stiffness of challenge in *Project Cars* allows it to slot easily beside *Assetto Corsa*, *rFactor 2* et al in the PC landscape. It's here where the multimonitor, force-feedback-wheel-owning audience lives, ready to pounce on the game's graphics scalability, Oculus Rift support and modding

**Publisher** Bandai Namco  
**Developer** Slightly Mad Studios  
**Format** PC, PS4 (version tested),  
 Xbox One, Wii U  
**Release** Out now

Sim snobbery  
 aside, the more  
 driving aids  
 you enable, the  
 less satisfying  
 the feeling of  
 being behind  
 the wheel



potential. On console, *Project Cars* is a more singular proposition. Simulation here is often spelled '*Gran Turismo*', and in the name of conveying a 200mph racing machine's agility and ferocity via a gamepad, invisible stabilisers are added to keep you more or less on track. It's when you try to push *Project Cars* out of its full-blown simulation comfort zone that the core experience diminishes. Sim-racer snobbery aside, the more driving aids you enable, the less satisfying the feeling of being behind the wheel. There isn't a *Need For Speed* handling model hidden away in the options, only increments by which the game begins to feel like it's playing itself.

**Tailoring the AI** to suit is similarly problematic. There's a slider to control other drivers' speed, but not their aggression – an omission you'll find glaring in its absence by the third time someone savages you in the braking zone of the last corner during qualifying. Opponent behaviour is uniformly berserk across all racing categories, which heightens the drama and the frustration. It's irritating to be squeezed and bumped in every turn-in point, every lap of every race, yes, but it's also marvellous to watch AI drivers treat each other with the same hostility. One will nudge another into an immovable tyre wall just in front of you. Three or four stubborn foes will jostle each other off the track in the opening lap, their conflict spilling onto run-off areas and sand traps. It's a thrilling, and believable, means for each race's narrative to unfold.

Except, of course, when it isn't able to. In its current state, a plethora of bizarre bugs sour the experience. Cars are occasionally flummoxed by the existence of a particular chicane, and pile up in their dozens as if trying to navigate blindfolded. Less frequently, trying to restart a race will simply freeze your current event. Qualifying results go awry, and cars sometimes gain undriveable properties for a single session until you quit and re-enter. These are all patchable issues, and such a patch is inbound at time of writing, but this is the state in which *Project Cars* hits shelves.

That's a great shame, because it tempers any broader praise about the PS4 version's smooth 60fps performance, which holds firm even with over 30 cars onscreen. Overall fidelity has been compromised noticeably to achieve it, but Slightly Mad knows its handling model is the real star of the show, and nothing would hurt its fluidity like dropped frames. Thank goodness it chose to preserve the quality of the driving above all. It might not have *Gran Turismo*'s encyclopaedic grasp of motoring history, but *Project Cars* is the most comprehensive and involving driving simulator we've seen on consoles in years. But while it may patch its way to something approaching greatness, right now some errant lines of code hold it back just shy of that mark.



**ABOVE** Aggressive opponent AI makes close positioning a frustratingly risky proposition. The resultant accidents from open-wheel contact are spectacular, however, and a refreshing change from other games' scrapes



**MAIN** Detailed pitbox options include an activity monitor to watch other drivers out on the track, and the ability to create track-specific tuning setups.  
**ABOVE** Bad weather will have a profound effect on your car's handling. Tackling a wet race with no aids is not for the faint hearted.  
**LEFT** Damage models are detailed and respond to the angle of impact, but also limited – don't expect *BeamNG*-style deformation





# Swords & Soldiers II

The role of a story mode in most realtime strategy games is to educate. It should teach you the idiosyncrasies of each playable faction, the nuances of each unit and the art of combining them skilfully, plus how to carefully regulate your limited pool of resources, all in order to prepare you for battle against another human. It's a tutorial, in other words, and *Swords & Soldiers II* has one of the genre's very best.

Its generous and varied campaign allows you to control units from all three sides, beginning with the Vikings, the game's de facto heroes, before moving on to the Persians and Demons. The double-crossing plot line is amusingly silly, the flimsy narrative centred on a mystical lamp and a secret recipe, and it allows for some truly awful puns and accents: the Vikings all speak in a bizarre hybrid of Nordic and Glaswegian, while a Persian food shack owner is named Al'Yucaneet.

More significantly, it affords Ronimo the room to mix things up, with a series of stages that impose severe restrictions – some curb your spending, others take spellcasting out of the equation – or involve unusual win conditions. Winning here is rarely a case of simply overpowering the enemy; indeed, on more than one occasion, we finished with substantially fewer units than our AI opponent. On one stage, you'll be asked to retrieve some heavily guarded hot sauce to summon veiled dancers to demolish a row of serpentine statues. Shortly afterward, a swirling sandstorm forces you to clear the way for a crocodilian convoy as you send goblins riding explosive barrels on kamikaze missions to blow up obstructive bomb towers and keep things moving. Later still, you'll find yourself in a one-on-one race, forcing you to make snap decisions about whether to spend your resources on pushing your opponent back or maintaining your own forward momentum.

**Such inventive flourishes** are rife. One quest asks you to manoeuvre a siege troll into position to hurl units across a chasm so they can hit a giant button that extends the bridge, a neat twist on Mario's age-old method of dispatching Bowser. It's not the only overt Nintendo reference, either. The top-down world map has enemies patrolling the routes between each node, and bumping into them triggers an optional skirmish. Here, you're given a choice over your tiers of available units, albeit restricted to ones you've deployed so far.

Often it feels more like a puzzle game than an RTS. That's most obvious during a sequence where you're asked to drop entry and exit portals to move between two planes, while occasionally laying down a barrier to bring your ever-marching band into a tighter formation. It's also highlights the inherent constraints of Ronimo's sidescrolling setup, serving as a reminder of how rarely you're afforded such direct control of the movement of your charges. Once you've sent them into the fray,

**Publisher/developer** Ronimo Games  
**Format** Wii U  
**Release** Out now

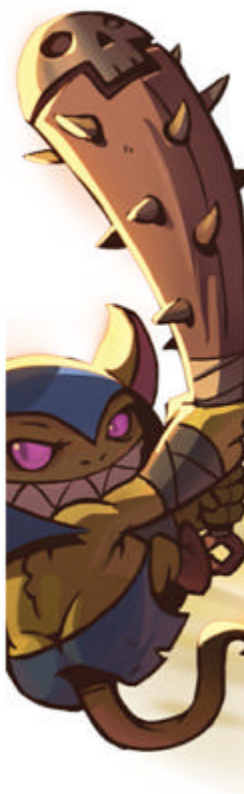
Attack isn't so much the best as the only form of defence, and the aggressive AI rarely gives you much thinking time

you're often entirely reliant on your mana pool to assist them with spells, whether it's plonking down a frozen Mjollnir to bat enemies back – and give ranged units a temporary defensive wall from behind which they can lob their projectiles – or to target individual foes, hitting them with bolts of lightning or turning them into sheep (in a cute touch, you can combine the two, creating a hunk of meat to feed your frontline warriors).

Yet too frequently you're left feeling helpless, as five floating fakirs in a row fall victim to the same projectile attack, simply because you've no way of either halting their advance or speeding them to safety. Sure, you can conjure an ovine Katamari to gather up your troops for a powerful joint assault, but such opportunities are rare. Otherwise, it's usually a long way between your base and where the action is, and by the time you've massed your ranks, it can be too late. Attack isn't so much the best as the only form of defence, and the aggressive AI rarely gives you much thinking time. There are bonus objectives on each stage, with rewards for finishing within some improbably stringent time limits, but by the campaign's final third you'll likely be happy to have simply triumphed and move on.

Still, it's hard to mind much when every offensive is overloaded with charm. This is an immeasurably better looking game than the original, with each sortie a cartoonish cavalcade of courageously expendable troops, each unit visually and functionally distinctive. The Cobra-like Naga look shocked at the impudence of their killer as they turn to stone. Prodigious moustachioed Vikings yomp into view with the fearlessness of the heroically drunk. Trolls shield-bash enemies with a dismissive swat, assuming their throwing stance with the reluctant weariness of an exhausted parent asked by their hyperactive offspring for yet another piggyback. It doesn't sound quite as pleasant: despite some solid voice work and fine effects, the repetition of soundbites and the sheer volume of units onscreen makes for a cacophonous racket of shouts, clanks and bangs.

Yes, the action can get busy, and attempting to target individual units amid the melee can feel like a fool's errand – while the original was similarly afflicted, these issues are harder to forgive a second time. And yet the lack of refinement isn't ruinous, and certainly not in local competitive play, with one player furrowing their brow at the GamePad's display and the other plotting via the TV. With a wide array of battlefields and options, you can tailor the game to your individual preferences, too. It's finally possible to play out a cagey battle with limited units and resources, though it's often more fun to simply let loose, unleash the hordes, and watch the pretty pyrotechnics that follow. *Swords & Soldiers II* may not be the most refined of strategy games, but it's an entertaining, accessible and outstandingly polished example of its type.



**RIGHT** One of the most effective spells – though it costs money as well as mana – enables you to bribe an opponent to switch sides. In an even match-up, a single unit can be enough to tilt the scales.

**MAIN** A range of control options is available, though by a distance the quickest and most intuitive is stylus on touchscreen – tapping on icons is, after all, far more immediate than squeezing a trigger and moving the analogue stick to select a unit from a radial menu.

**BOTTOM** The Demons are the trickiest force to master, but their units and spells are delightfully unorthodox. Even fallen troops can come in handy: one spell generates poison gas from corpses, while Necromancers can raise the dead



**ABOVE** You can't afford to dally against the AI. It plays aggressively, and can sometimes launch an offensive while you're still gathering gold and mana. It pays to send out a few grunts early, if only to stall for more time



# Crypt Of The Necrodancer

There's a dark magician buried deep within Brace Yourself's rhythm-action dungeon crawler, but it's not the one immortalised in the logo. No, his name is Danny Baranowsky and his synth-drenched musicality is the pacemaker strapped to the pulsing heart of *Crypt Of The Necrodancer*. Across four varied zones of procedurally generated dungeon, you'll hear him exhume myriad musical styles – heavy rock riffs collide with twinkling electronica, chilled club floor anthems give way to cochlea-rattling bass – while the relentless beat drives you ever onwards.

The game his music animates is no less entrancing. You'll start as Cadence, a determined hero whose heart has been plucked from her in a bizarre ritual, and so who can now only move in four directions and in time with the music as she delves after her quarry. Drop a beat and she'll stand stock still, losing her coin multiplier. If you want to buy the best gear from the golden-walled shops, you'll have to keep moving.

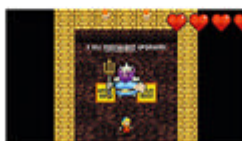
It's a complicating factor in your high-stakes dance-offs with a bestiary of conventional gribblier rendered entirely out of the ordinary by also being enslaved to the rhythm. Every foe has a ruleset or pattern of varying complexity. A simple blue slime, for instance, hops between two squares, pausing a beat between each leg of the journey, whereas a mounted skeleton on a phantom horse moves every beat and actively chases you down, becoming a shield-bearing undead knight when stripped of its mount. Even the toughest foes, such as parrying blademeisters and dragons with flash-freezing breath, can be defeated flawlessly once you know their openings and figure out a sequence to exploit them.

In theory, that means all damage is avoidable, though mobs, floor traps and tight confines contrive to make even well-educated runs fraught and improvisational, rather than rote algorithmic deconstructions. This is a puzzle where the pieces are shifting every moment, and solutions are found instinctively as much as tactically. The best runs induce an absorbing, trance-like state, and beating a difficult stage that's killed you countless times delivers a rapturous buzz.

And with a bevy of loot at your disposal, found in chests or bought from shops manned by delightful warbling merchants, no two runs are ever totally the same. A Crown Of Thorns, for instance, exacts a blood price from your meagre stock of hearts, but restores some vitality after every ten kills. A frost dagger freezes enemies it strikes and then deals ludicrous damage to any monster covered in ice. Longwords extend your attack range to two squares, while flails and whips broaden it out from just the tile in front of you. And since you stay in place while you strike, and are typically hit by enemies that would move into your tile, each new attack pattern has implications for your footstep in this demanding tango.

**Publisher** Brace Yourself Games, Klei Entertainment  
**Developer** Brace Yourself Games  
**Format** PC  
**Release** Out now

This is a puzzle where the pieces are shifting every moment, solutions found instinctively as much as tactically



## LOBBY GROUP

While the diamonds found in levels power the game's overarching economy, you'll have to rescue most of the lobby shopkeepers before you can spend your ice. Many vendors are found trapped in golden cages, and will direct you to dig for or purchase the matching key to release them. That done, they'll appear back in the lobby, a few ready to unlock new items or remove them from the potential pool, but the majority offering ways to train against enemies. The most useful shop keeper, however, is held in a glass cage, and he returns meaning to diamonds by letting you buy items to start runs with. Since his key can only be found in secret rooms and shatters when you take a hit, great care and skill are needed before you can dictate your starting weapon.

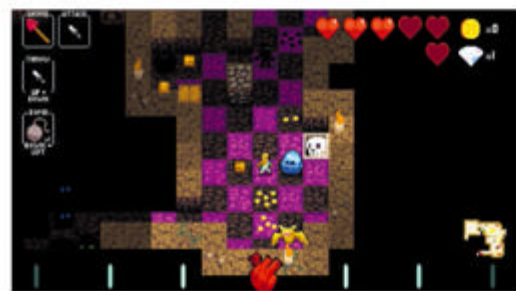
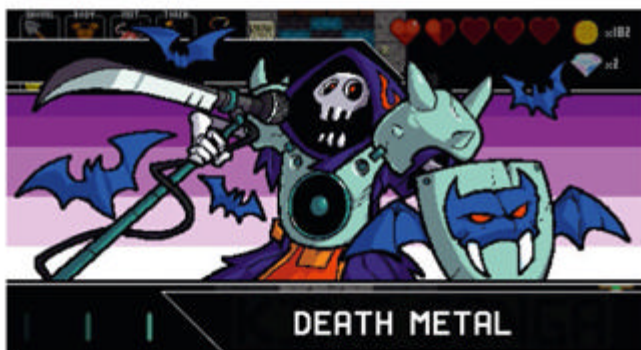
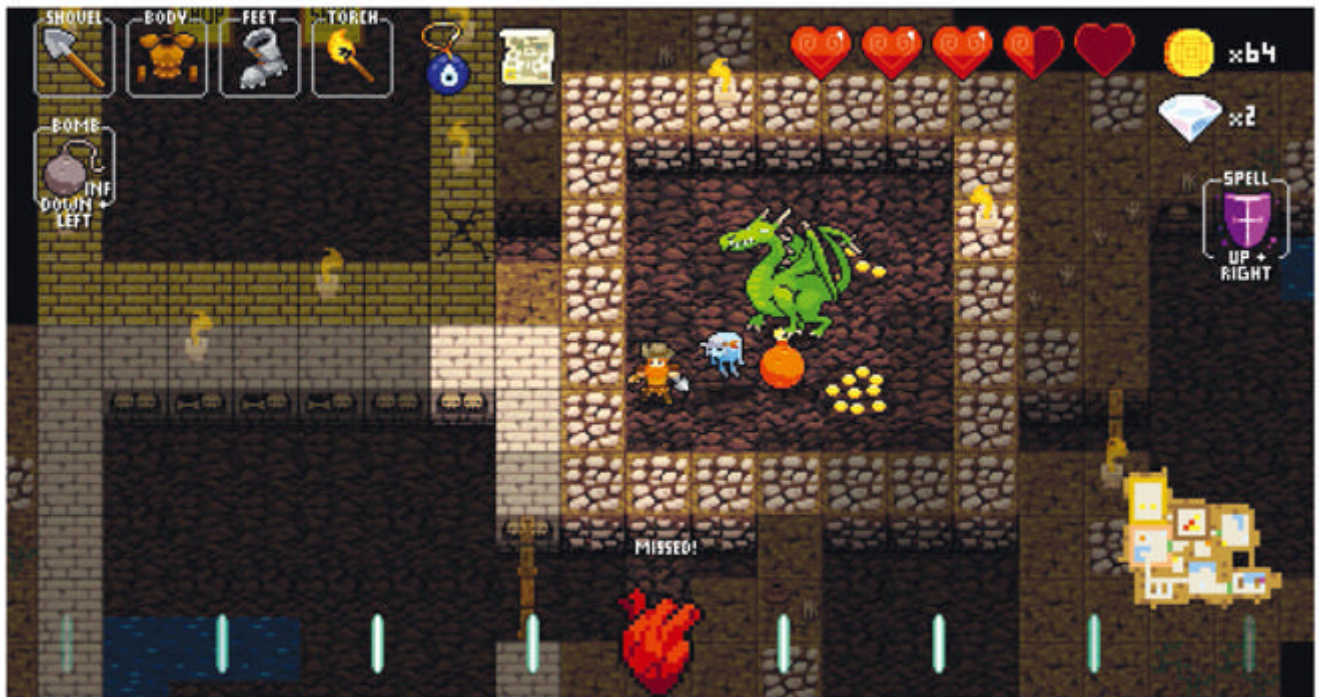
But even the basic toolset is capable in rhythmically gifted hands. Cadence starts each zone with a shovel, dagger, and a single bomb, and every item has uses beyond the obvious. Digging opens up new paths, sure, but it can also act as a buffer, soaking up a beat by destroying a block without crumbling your multiplier. Bombs are good for clearing tougher walls the basic shovel can't handle, but the three-beat fuse makes it effective for impromptu mine traps. Even the dagger is flexible, a combo press of up and down flinging it in the direction of your next keystroke, damaging all in its path at the cost of being defenceless until you fetch it.

**It's this level** of nuance, the steep difficulty, and a quietly subversive spirit that elevate *Crypt Of The Necrodancer* far beyond the realm of one-hit wonder. While the three levels and boss fight in each zone can be conquered in minutes, it took us hours of instructive deaths to see the fourth area. As areas fall, you'll unlock new characters, each remixing the rules and often heightening the difficulty. The more fragile Bard, for instance, sets the beat rather than follows it, making the game turn-based. The Monk will die if he breaks his vow of poverty, so gold deposits become lethal obstacles. Dove is a pacifist, only prepared to stun enemies rather than kill them, though she doesn't need to defeat minibosses to unlock the steps to the next level. And genderqueer Bolt ups the pace and the pressure.

A lavish number of modes and options give you just as many reasons to keep coming back. You can play with a co-op partner, or plug in a dance mat and take on a simplified version of the game. Daily challenges and All Zones mode ask you to heighten your skills again, with leaderboards to climb. You have a level of creative control, too, able to swap out that excellent soundtrack for the tunes of your choice, with a level editor chaser if you also tire of the algorithms that build your gauntlets.

*Crypt Of The Necrodancer* hits a lot of high notes, then, but one or two bum ones as well. You'll often feel at the mercy of loot drops, and while diamonds unlock new items for the item pool – as well as take old ones out of it – having to jump back to the lobby to spend them between runs does lend the game a rather staccato rhythm at first. That soon fades, however, because while the game's loot hoard is generous, the unlock system isn't broad enough to sustain the gems' relevancy into the late zones, let alone the late game.

Those are incidental details in the face of such a virtuoso feat of creativity, finding a new way to express old ideas and kick both the rhythm-action and indie Roguelike up to 11. It definitely plays to a certain nerdcore crowd, with few concessions to the timing deficient or impatient, but few games waltz through the fires of Early Access and arrive out the other end in possession of this much grace and charm.

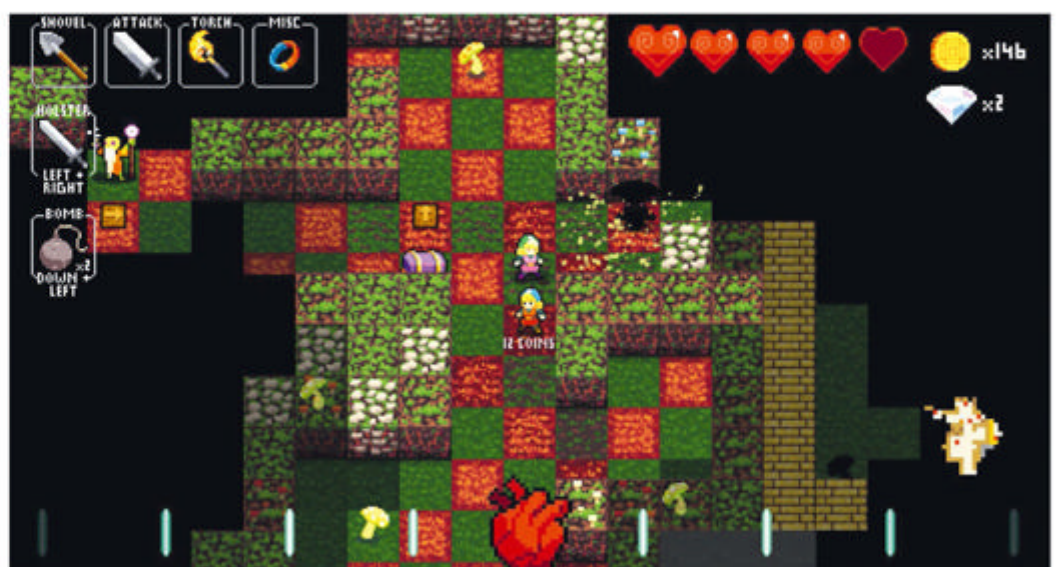


**ABOVE** Monk's allergy to filthy lucre makes defeated enemies even more deadly than living ones. While careful route planning is always crucial in this game, you'll have to dig walls, kill and kite tactically to avoid restarts

**MAIN** Eli trades weapons for an infinite supply of bombs and the ability to hoof them several tiles away. Armour is still useful, though, given the likelihood of catching yourself in incautious blasts.

**ABOVE** The bosses are a colourfully designed bunch, and often ask for mob management, though your array of gear when you face them can reduce the complexity hugely.

**RIGHT** That's Cadence's heart there in the bottom of the screen, pulsing away to the beat. As you progress through the three levels in each zone, the tempo rises, giving you less and less time to make each decision. Hit the end of a song, meanwhile, and you'll be plunged unceremoniously to the next floor





# Invisible, Inc

What is it about breaking rules that we find so beguiling? What shard of the human spirit is it that wants to plant two feet and stick the same number of fingers up at the system? Whatever it is, clandestine agency Invisible, Inc has given in to the temptation often. Which is why, in the opening seconds of an incandescent campaign, the megacorps that rule this noirish cyberpunk world join forces to eradicate you from the face of the Earth.

Driven from your home with naught but a shuttle, just two agents not either dead or captured, and a fast-degrading but ludicrously potent AI called Incognita, you have 72 hours of backup power to find a way to keep her from fragmenting completely, at which point all hope is lost. That's in-game hours; the whole campaign could take you as little as three in real time. It's a breathless start to a game that does nothing but escalate until the nerve-shredding finale, a haymaker of a finisher that will floor you in one way or another.

The part in between is all about riding the crest of the disaster curve, and the thrill of transgression. You are in control of hacker-spies on the run, and the only way to stay ahead of the corps is to keeping doing what they do best: slip in through the back door, snatch whatever you need, and make a break for it before you attract too much attention. Here that means turn-based sneaking across gridded facilities in which you'll find yourself consistently outgunned – if an agent's exposed and cornered, a single shot will take them down – hiding always a cleaner option than confrontation.

That implies *Invisible, Inc* is a stealth game, but that's only true insofar as it suits you to not be seen coming. You can play aggressively if you can balance out the negatives, while procedurally generated levels and evolving threats eliminate the path-watching memory tests and rote learning hang-ups of that genre. It's more a high-stakes heist simulator with no time for malice aforethought. Stealth's just one tool in your roll bag.

But it will still take plenty of thought to keep your agents alive. Partially, that's a question of target priority. After the obligatory first mission yields a list of juicy sites to hit, you have to examine the pings on the globe and weigh up the benefits of each potential take. Is it worth ten hours in the air to spring someone from a secretive holding cell, hoping that it's a fellow Inc-ling? Or do you raid a nearby cybernetics lab to install a few body mods, and then crash the server farm next door to bolster Incognita's subroutines in the same time frame? You'll need money to pay for your black market toys, too, and to develop your agents' very particular skillsets. Seventy-two hours feels awfully tight when it slices down to just a handful of missions to get all that done.

Sterner tests await when you teleport into each level. The corps may lack much in the way of differentiation and identity – one plush, Deco-futuristic office here is

**Publisher/developer** Klei Entertainment  
**Format** PC (version tested), PS4  
**Release** Out now (PC), TBA

It's a high-stakes heist simulator with no time for malice aforethought. Stealth's just one tool in your roll bag



much like any other – but they all jealously guard their stuff. Patrolling guards and drones are obvious lines of defence, but you face layers of digital protection, too. And here's where Incognita demonstrates why she's worth saving, a click allowing you to see the world as she does: a matrix of security subsystems and the firewalls that protect them. At first, using her is little more than a case of clicking to hijack cameras or cut the power to infrared grids, with nothing out of reach, but a limited pool of power and the backlashes that come as the threat level climbs soon mandate judicious hacking. Firewalls rack up and daemons are installed that punish you for compromising their systems, stacking negative effects atop you unless you can afford countermeasures of your own. And missions often force you to confront your greed: you may *want* the contents of that safe, but can you afford not to hack a walking gun platform and use it to head off the guard who's coming to check up on the bug you tripped last turn, all because you hadn't left yourself the reserves to deafen it? Fans of clear inspiration Netrunner will know the feeling well.

**With the dynamic** systems of both the physical and digital worlds to juggle, each feeding into the other, it's not infrequently that the thrill of tinkering with a Rube Goldberg machine of potential disaster gives way to the horror of the whole thing crashing down around your agents' fedoras and chrome cans. With their death a likely outcome of pushing your luck too far, you're granted a stock of turn rewinds, the limits tightening as you ascend the difficulty tiers. Without the safety net of Beginner mode, which is otherwise no soppy tutorial, mission outcomes are fixed, however, so undos become another limited resource to handle with care.

As befits a system of so many adeptly crafted layers, *Invisible, Inc* offers a brilliant game of lock picking, where each tumbler has to receive just the right amount of pressure to progress. But it assimilates a little too much machine to connect as successfully on a human level. Despite the wonderful vibe imbued by the expressive art style and the dry tones of matronly M-alike Central, agents are merely pawns that boil down to little more than a dossier photo and special ability. Similarly, Klei hints at an intriguing world of clashing, distinctive conglomerates, which is instantly undercut when the level tiles feel like they're all drawn from the same bag. That's not to say *Invisible, Inc* is bland; a game that allows you to deliver a final quip in desperate circumstances is not short on personality. Nor is it insubstantial; this is rare case where the drive to keep experimenting means the gap between finishing one campaign and starting the next can be measured in microseconds. It's just sometimes too obvious that it's cold, emotionless rules, not people, you're flipping the Vs to from moment to moment.



**ABOVE** Central runs the agency, and her crisp briefings do much to flesh out a potentially sterile world. She is also, not coincidentally, the character you connect with most, highlighting the power of the performance



**TOP** Unless you diversify well, it's possible that you won't see all the mission types before the final operation. It's yet another reason to replay the game, along with mixing up your starting agents and Incognita's preinstalled programs.

**MAIN** The final mission ups the max squad count from four to six, but makes some brutal demands. At least you have more bodies with which to pin any of the so-called 'protectors' you stun – if you sit on the same space as a downed enemy, you will stall their recovery and return to the playing field.

**RIGHT** As it did with *Mark Of The Ninja*, Klei has worked hard at making *Invisible, Inc.*'s stealth systems readable. Squares in sight of an enemy are red, and ones where you can escape notice in their vision cone are yellow. If you are caught, your only options are to bolt to an adjacent yellow square or take the offending guard out, usually via another agent. One wrong move and you've had it





# Sunset

Cleaner, tailor, interior decorator, PA, confidante, lover: whichever mantle you assume in *Sunset*, there's no role quite as enjoyable as that of observer. As Angela Burnes, a US immigrant in the fictional Latin American state of Anchuria, you're tasked with spending an hour each day in the bachelor pad of wealthy businessman Gabriel Ortega. Usually, this involves cleaning, polishing and tidying up, but your chores allow plenty of time to simply explore this luxurious '70s apartment. There's a natural voyeuristic thrill to snooping, and while Ortega is unknowable initially, the enigma soon fades as you learn more about your employer by examining his décor and detritus.

Soon, however, the temperature begins to rise, and we're not talking about a humid Anchurian summer. The region is embroiled in a civil war, with Burnes' brother taking up arms against a despotic regime. At first she sees Ortega's penthouse as an oasis of calm away from the conflict, but perhaps it can be something more: with the chance to respond playfully — even flirtatiously — to his notes, this could yet be an opportunity to influence a powerful ally. The choice between performing tasks coldly or with warmth allows you to feel you're having some small influence on

When your chores are completed, it's well worth putting your feet up and making use of Ortega's lavish sound system. Austin Wintory's soundtrack is accomplished and eclectic, taking in opera, funk and Latin American folk

**Publisher/developer** Tale Of Tales  
**Format** PC  
**Release** Out now



## HURRY ON SUNDOWN

This is Tale Of Tales' most technically demanding game to date. The geometry is relatively simple, but an abundance of reflective surfaces and light sources means you'll need a half-decent rig for it to run smoothly at high detail. It's already a handsome setting, but the lighting is outstanding: shadows and tones subtly change throughout the magic hour you spend in Ortega's place, and as the seasons pass you'll notice it's a little darker as you arrive for your shift.

Ortega — and if not that, then at least you can give his home a personal touch. This is a space that changes through actions both within and beyond your control, leaving you aware you have influence but not domain.

You're made to feel liberated and disempowered by turns. A first act that sees the worker-employer dynamic blossom into a relationship — the more earthy exchanges offer a heady frisson not dissimilar to an Internet flirtation — segues into a languid second, before the conflict encroaches in discomfiting fashion. One jolt leaves you feeling horribly vulnerable, and just as Burnes finds comfort in her routines amid the chaos, there's a moment of petty callousness that prompts first despondency, then anger. As a haven becomes a fortress, our horror is mirrored in a startling image of Burnes' reflection as she catches sight of a headline on a news ticker and clasps her hands to her mouth.

With most key events happening offscreen, we're left to experience the physical and emotional aftermath, literally and figuratively picking up the pieces. The result is an enormously affecting examination of the impact of war. Not on soldiers or politicians, but on everyone else — those who can only watch from the sidelines. *Sunset* is the work of a sometimes inscrutable studio at its most accessible, and its best. At once contemplative and incendiary, this is a quiet game within which burns a fierce revolutionary spirit.

9



# Puzzle & Dragons Z

So this is what it looks like when Nintendo tries to preserve the value of software. Satoru Iwata's infamous GDC 2011 jibe at free-to-play games felt naïve at the time and sounds even sillier four years on. Now Nintendo makes free-to-play games for 3DS and is taking its IP to mobiles. Yet here is the most popular smartphone game in Japan, tweaked and presented as a full-price release with nary a microtransaction in sight.

Those changes are illuminating, saying much about Nintendo's sweetly old-fashioned view of games, but also what makes a free-to-play game successful. Gone are the F2P hooks: there's no stamina bar to restrict freeloaders' playtimes; just the one currency, acquired entirely in-game; and no premium Egg Machine holding the game's best monsters. The incentive to return on a regular basis is drastically reduced, too, with no rotating daily dungeons or fluctuating monster drop rates. *PAD* has been turned from a theoretically endless dungeon crawler into a traditional linear story-driven RPG.

These changes are logical, expected consequences of turning a free-to-play game into a paid one, but they have other knock-on effects. It's terribly slow, for one thing – on mobile, GungHo wants you to burn through that stamina bar quickly, but here lavish animations

*PAD Z*'s stock RPG story – young unknown saves the world from peril – is livened up by Syrup, an ever-so-British dragon that celebrates victories with "Back of the net!" and reacts to the unexpected with "Blimey!"

**Publisher** Nintendo  
**Developer** GungHo Online Entertainment  
**Format** 3DS  
**Release** Out now



## SKILLS SHORTAGE

*PAD* teams are constructed of two leaders and four subs. While all monsters have an active skill, leaders also have a passive, which typically boosts your team's stats. On mobile, we have leaders that can deliver a situational x5 attack; here, values raise "slightly", "a little" or "a medium amount". And limiting your second leader to StreetPass hits means you're often stuck with the random, usually unhelpful handful the game offers before a dungeon.

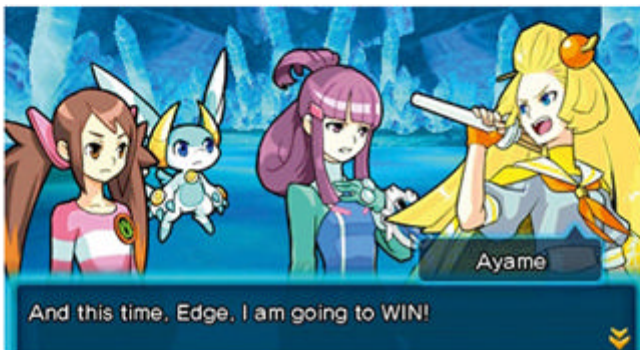
mean battles lack pace and framerates plummet. Death means a warp back to the hub town, the action a short trek and too many dialogue boxes away.

The *Super Mario Bros Edition* – released separately in Japan but bundled here – takes a slightly different tack, borrowing the *Mario* assets and placing restrictions on how you construct teams by separating out leaders, helpers and regular team members. It feels a good deal less flexible as a result, and doesn't help itself by giving you the strongest leader and helper at the end of World 3, discouraging experimentation thereafter.

That, in fact, is the biggest problem for both *PAD Z* and its spinoff: the vastly reduced monster pools, which erode the thrill of assembling the perfect team. On mobile, *Puzzle & Dragons*' peaks lie in outputting damage in the millions with a deliciously overpowered, hard-won squad. Here, you just scrape through fights with a so-so set of monsters with humdrum abilities.

Satoru Iwata wants to preserve the value of software, and by bundling two games for a generously discounted price, *PAD Z* makes a fair case for paying up front. But it also shows that there's far more to well-done F2P than a price tag; that mechanics have to work in concert with the monetisation. It's a fine lesson for Nintendo, but that's no help to a game which is potentially a good deal cheaper, and certainly a whole lot better, on phones than it is on 3DS.

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# Steins Gate

Six years on from its Japanese debut, *Steins Gate* arrives in Europe with a reputation for intelligent, character-led storytelling, one which its opening moments seem keen to dispel. The first bloodied corpse shows up ten minutes in, followed quickly by a squirmily uncomfortable scene in which our protagonist lifts up a teenage girl's blouse. Soon after, we're thrust into a high-concept conspiracy involving a microwave activated by text messages that turns bananas into gel and may, or may not, hold the secret to time travel.

The introduction isn't entirely representative of what follows, but those hoping for a visual novel to eschew the histrionics and contrived machinations of peers like 999: *Nine Hours, Nine Persons, Nine Doors* or *Danganronpa* and its sequel may be mildly disappointed. Needless to say, fans of those games will find plenty to enjoy here, even if there's a key point of difference in its semi-frequent lulls, where the focus moves away from the demands of the plot and onto some unusually thoughtful character development.

Indeed, the game's sudden shifts mirror the internal conflict of university student Rintarou Okabe and his alternative persona, crazed scientist Hououin Kyouma. Through judicious use of diegesis, we're invited to

The 2D character art is far from generic, although with so much text to tap through it feels slightly static on the big screen. Assuming there are no hitches in the porting process, Vita would appear to be a better fit

**Publisher** PQube  
**Developer** 5pb, Nitroplus  
**Format** PS3 (tested), Vita  
**Release** Out now



## WORD FORWARD

The sheer volume of text in the game demonstrates why it's taken so long to reach English-speaking audiences. It's still significantly overwritten, but a terrific localisation mines every nugget of insight from the script. There's an extensive glossary, too, ranging from detail about the 11 theories of time travel to thorough explanations of otaku terminology. It's hard not to admire a game that covers both Dirac antiparticle theory and fujoshi.

question not only his reliability as a narrator, but whether his seemingly non-sequitur utterances are delusion or acuity. By turns lucid and manic, and realised with a dauntless, committed performance by Japanese voice actor Mamoru Miyano, he's the most fascinatingly unhinged protagonist since Francis York Morgan, and a narrative fulcrum to latch onto even as the plot threatens to spin off its axis.

Still, it's a story with genuine smarts, even if they're rationed somewhat, interspersed with lengthy, patience-testing exchanges of questionable narrative value, lightly comedic interludes, and the convolutions of a rococo plot.

As such, it aims both high and low, splicing talk of wormholes and worldlines with examinations of contemporary otaku culture – and if that means its temporal tapestry occasionally unravels, it also results in plenty of loose threads upon which to tug. Not that you'll always know which ones you're pulling: your interactions are limited to responding to, or ignoring, Okabe's emails and text messages, choosing subjects in hyperlinks with no way of knowing the tone of the missive before hitting send. You'll likely need the aid of a walkthrough to see the game's true ending, but with fresh narrative splinters to uncover, and the most charismatic of guides to follow, it's a journey that bears repeating.

7







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# Deadly Premonition

Enigma machine: why Hidetaka Suehiro's  
lynchian horror was purpose-built to baffle

**By CHRIS SCHILLING**



**Publisher** Ignition Entertainment (US), Rising Star Games (EU) **Developer** Access Games **Format** 360, PS3 **Release** 2010

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**F**ive years since it careened onto the market, accepted wisdom still has it that *Deadly Premonition* is 'so bad it's good'. It's the kind of appraisal that catches on easily, particularly for niche or cult works, and so the game is now recognised as such among those who haven't played it. It also happens to be almost entirely incorrect, a lazy shorthand that doesn't come anywhere close to untangling the idiosyncratic appeal of this fascinating, bizarre game.

Nonetheless, it's a phrase that's haunted *Deadly Premonition* since it was first released to the press. Its wildly divergent early appraisals were responsible for it earning a Guinness World Record for Most Critically Polarizing Survival Horror Game, a category seemingly conceived for the title. But many of the positive critiques were far from celebratory in tone; rather, they mocked the technical flaws and off-kilter narrative. One 10/10 review described it as "a trainwreck"; elsewhere, an op-ed declaring it Game Of The Year dripped with heavy sarcasm.

Director Hidetaka 'Swery' Suehiro would likely have welcomed kinder words after a few particularly vicious early reviews. Then again, perhaps he was just pleased that the game had even made it to store shelves. *Deadly Premonition*'s gestation was troubled, to say the least — originally titled *Rainy Woods*, development was shifted from PS2 to 360 and PS3 after a disastrous debut appearance at 2007's Tokyo Game Show. The official line said the game was rebooted owing to technical issues, but there were concerns of plagiarism, too, the game bearing such an uncanny resemblance to *Twin Peaks* that some suggested David Lynch should consult his lawyers.

**Those accusations still** apply to the finished, renamed game. Lynch's venerated drama isn't so much a loose inspiration as a source from which to thief. As special agents arriving in small towns to investigate the murders of young women, Dale Cooper and Francis York Morgan have more than a little in common. The comparisons extend further: both have a penchant for coffee and are prone to eccentric behaviour, and both regularly dictate messages to unseen figures,

albeit rather than talk to a portable cassette recorder, York presses two fingers to his ear to communicate with the mysterious Zach.

The agents are far from the only points of overlap, with the details tweaked slightly to differentiate the game from its most overt influence. *Deadly Premonition* was hardly the first work to draw inspiration from Lynch, of course — Remedy's *Alan Wake*, released months later, pointedly acknowledged the debt. But while it's hard to excuse such brazen larceny, Suehiro also managed to capture something much rarer than his peers. *Twin Peaks* was steeped in a constant, gnawing sense of unease, a result of Lynch's skilful juxtaposition of the mundane and the otherworldly. The same could easily be said of *Deadly Premonition*.

In other words, it's the mood rather than the details that make York's investigation similarly absorbing. It's also what sets it apart from the likes of *Alan Wake*, which attempts to pull the same trick but is too mired in convention to be truly weird. Beneath the leafy, welcoming surface, there is something clearly wrong about Greenvale, and it's communicated in a number of ways, from unconventional camera angles to exaggerated animations, ill-fitting musical cues and non-sequitur dialogue. It's not always clear whether this is by accident, and in some cases technical limitations appear to play no small part, though Suehiro's GDC talks and last year's *D4: Dark Dreams Don't Die* present compelling evidence of method in what can often seem like design madness.

Indeed, it often appears to have been developed with something of an art brut mentality, with scant regard for design convention, or even for player convenience. Take the driving — some will wish they could, and humanely euthanise it — which is certain to give you fresh appreciation of the taut handling of supermarket shopping trolleys. Not only are vehicles awkward to control, but they're tediously slow, too. Journeys to mission markers on the other side of Greenvale take upwards of ten minutes as York rigorously obeys the speed limits, occasionally daring to travel ten miles per hour faster if he's in a vehicle equipped with a police siren. Many players have completed *Deadly Premonition* without realising that a fast-travel alternative is available, no doubt because the item that ►





affords you this option, a police radio, is tucked away as a reward for completing a side mission. The same applies to the infinite wrench, a melee weapon that makes the game's nightmare sequences — whose clumsy combat and disappointing reliance on survival-horror tropes are the game's one real adherence to type — far more tolerable.

In each case, you're essentially rewarded for taking time out from the story, which is gently encouraged by the mechanics even as it's discouraged by your police companions. You'll be chided should your focus drift from the investigation, though you're almost always free to let it do so as long as you meet given appointment times. Even then, you can repeat chapters to discover more about Greenvale and its inhabitants, each of which has their own routines. And much as the story propels you towards the



stringency, yet there's an underlying logic to them all. You'll need to change suits to prevent York being labelled a 'stinky agent', and not only because you'll see flies buzzing around him if he doesn't get his attire dry-cleaned, but because you'll incur a wage penalty. Shaving, washing, sleeping, eating, even smoking to while away the hours until a meeting; on the face of it, these are banal activities, but they ground you in a reality that makes the surrounding strangeness all the more unsettling. The same goes for

A 2013 *Director's Cut* adds an unnecessary framing device that's nevertheless in keeping with the offbeat tone of the game. York also gains access to a larger wardrobe, with suits that multiply monetary rewards, or stave off tiredness

## 'SO BAD IT'S GOOD' IS TOO GLIB A DISMISSAL FOR A GAME THAT HAS GENUINE DESIGN WISDOM TO IMPART

next mission marker, the game is at its best when you simply spend time in its world. You'll need to pay attention to store opening times and even the weather, since some missions only become available during a downpour, say. This mix of freedom and restriction forces you to engage with the world and its rules in a way that fits York's place within it as both a detective and interloper. You're rewarded for careful observation and thorough exploration, while being reminded that this is a place capable of functioning with or without your presence. Many games place you at the centre of their universe; here, you're just watching it go by, an outsider on the inside.

Gradually, its rules inveigle themselves into your play, mirroring York's deeper feelings of attachment to Greenvale. It imposes them with varying degrees of

York's observations on '80s cinema that enliven those car journeys, the best reason to use the police radio more judiciously. At first, his observations seem to be lifted from each film's Wikipedia entry, as York talks release dates and actor bios, but some points could only come from a true fan. They're part of what makes him such a distinctive lead. Let's face it, *Uncharted 4* is unlikely to see Nathan Drake debating the merits of Attack Of The Killer Tomatoes.

For all the scripted moments that passed into gaming's lexicon — the infamous 'F K in the coffee' line, the 'Sinner's Sandwich' scene — these character beats are every bit as important. The more time you spend in Greenvale, the more you'll learn about its cast and their routines, their peccadilloes, simply by doing what a detective would do: following them, watching them, talking to



TOP The game's more extreme moments were toned down, though it is still often brutal.  
ABOVE Film grain and weather effects try in vain to disguise the game's origin on PS2



## DOG DAYS

One of the game's most enduring riddles is the arrival of a giant demonic hound, which will suddenly appear on the road between midnight and 6am – encouragement, perhaps, to turn in early. The red-eyed beast will attack York's car and attempt to prevent him driving off, but is unable to harm him unless he leaves his vehicle. The reason behind its presence is never made explicit, although it seems likely that it's a physical manifestation of York's mental fragility. The black dog is, after all, a common metaphor for depression. It disappears as day breaks, and it's never acknowledged otherwise, but that's in keeping with Suehiro's love of the enigmatic, made plain by one of York's observations: "Life is fun because of the mysteries."



York can hold his breath to sneak by enemies, though stealth is rarely the best option, and often impossible. The jerky movement of your targets makes gunplay awkward, leaving melee weapons as comfortably the best approach to combat

them. Ask yourself, what was the last game you played where you could not only list several NPC names, but recall their speech patterns, behavioural quirks and hobbies?

**There's much to** be said, too, for the game's capacity to surprise. Just as you think you've acclimatised to its rhythms, you'll be jolted out of your comfort zone by a revelation or a shift in structure. The chases involving the Raincoat Killer are a case in point, with splitscreen techniques and a rare use of secondperson perspective adding something fresh to what would otherwise be rote survival-horror escape sequences. Here is one example of the fussy controls and York's ungainly movement working in the game's favour: the struggle to get away, replete with button-mashing and stick-waggling interludes, feels

genuinely nightmarish, even if your pursuer strikes a faintly tragicomic figure at times.

None of this, of course, insures *Deadly Premonition* from the criticism it deserves. After a startling twist, its final act is a disappointing lurch into *Resident Evil*-style excess, concluding with a boss fight against a monstrous mutant. As with most of the combat, it feels as if Suehiro's heart isn't in it, and though a more thoughtful coda compensates somewhat, the damage has been done. Others will struggle to look past the variable framerate, lo-res textures and stiff animation, though it's worth considering the circumstances. Here, after all, was a small studio working with unfamiliar hardware after years of handheld dominance had left most Japanese devs a generation behind western counterparts.

*Deadly Premonition* is, then, a truly mercurial game, a creation compromised less by the demands of a publisher, more by a lack of resources and the inexperience of its development team. But 'so bad it's good' is too glib a dismissal for a game that has genuine design wisdom to impart. There is much to be said for a game that allows its players the space to get bored or lost, that leaves plot threads untied and mysteries unexplained – and, yes, that makes you pay close to 100 bucks for a turkey sandwich. As York presses two fingers to his ear to talk with his alter ego, it's as if Suehiro is inviting you to tune into the game's internal frequency. Good or bad, no one since has broadcast on a similar wavelength. ■







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# Create expectations

With more routes into the game industry than ever, which tools, and which approaches, should you be considering?

Making games – even the comparatively small ones – is a complex, time-consuming business, but it needn't be expensive. At least not to begin with. There's now a multitude of tools available for nascent game creators to use at little or no cost, and all manner of ways to get your project into the hands of players. Today's industry is extremely different to the one that existed a decade ago – a scene that had yet to experience the impact of Xbox Live, iOS or Unity – and offers more opportunities for creators than ever before, though more competition with them. With such a wealth of options out there, narrowing down exactly where you should focus your efforts is a daunting task, and it's easy to get caught up in the notion that mainstream 3D packages such as Unreal Engine and Unity are the only options worth considering. While becoming proficient in either would certainly be an excellent way to catalyse your game career, it's not just about the big names.

"I believe that making the game you want to make, with the engine that is appropriate, is all that matters," says Funomena CEO **Robin Hunicke**. "Games like *Mainichi*, *Dys4ia* and *Lim*, *Today I Die*, *Windsill*, *A Dark Room*, *Gone Home* – they all moved me without being intense, 3D experiences in Unreal. It isn't the tool that people remember, it's the experience. And when it comes to demonstrating skill or being able to show you can work with others, the tool will be the least important part of the equation. It will be your curiosity and ability to learn and communicate what you do that stand out."

And in a world where an experience can count for more than raw technical skill, it's possible to make some surprising discoveries. *Gunpoint* creator and



Derek Yu's *Spelunky* was released on PC as freeware in 2009, but was given an HD makeover in 2012

former PC Gamer writer **Tom Francis** fell into making games when he realised that *Spelunky* was created using YoYo Games' GameMaker: Studio. "It's one of my favourite games ever, and when I found out you could make something like that in a tool aimed at beginners, I felt I'd run out of excuses not to give game making a try," he tells us.

GameMaker: Studio is one of many tools that sacrifice top-end aesthetics in order to specialise in simpler, 2D projects, but that hasn't stymied its popularity with professional designers. Along with *Spelunky*, *Gunpoint* and Francis's in-development *Heat Signature*, GameMaker can also boast of being the foundation for high-profile projects such as *Hotline Miami*, *Nidhogg* and *Hyper Light Drifter*.

Francis is so enamoured of it, in fact, that he's published a series of tutorials ([www.bit.ly/MakerTuts2](http://www.bit.ly/MakerTuts2)) for the free version of GameMaker, aimed at people with little time and even less

experience. "It's ridiculous," he says.

"I owe literally my entire livelihood for the past two years, and many more to come, to a copy of GameMaker that cost me \$30, and I pay them no royalties. The current version costs \$100, which I dare say hasn't pushed it into unreasonable territory."

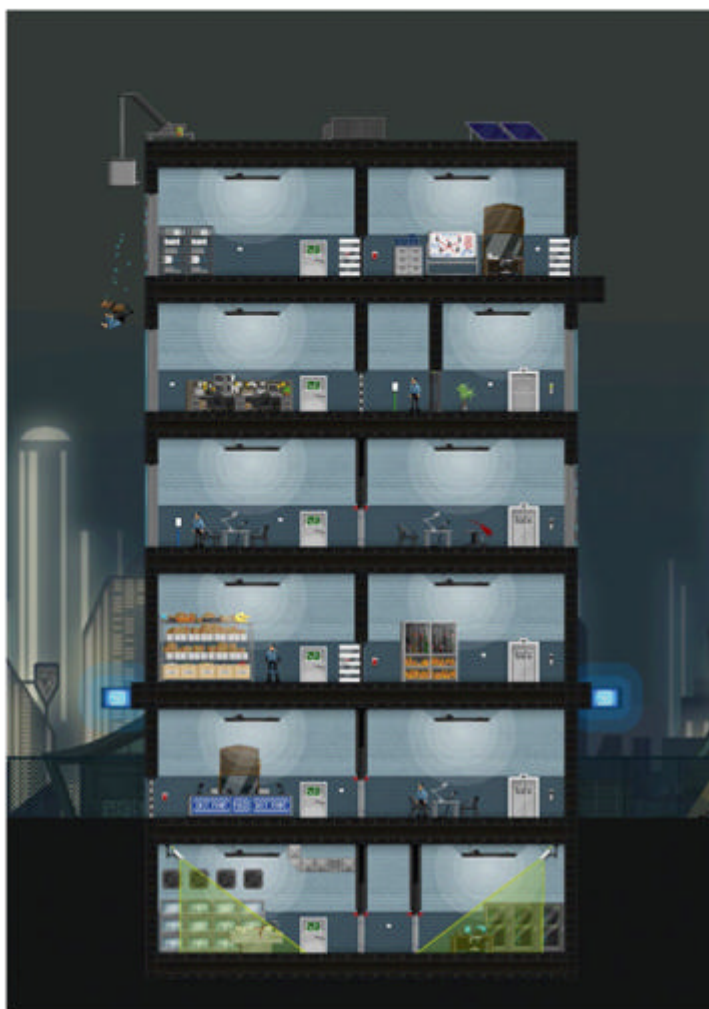
## Although Francis's particular

route into game creation means that he's never had to apply for a job, his work on *Gunpoint* has yielded two offers from game studios that he chooses not to name. And he believes that it's easier now than it ever was to create something on your own. That's not to say you shouldn't think about joining a team, however, even if it's one made up of only a dozen or so members, but be aware that working in a small unit brings its own challenges.

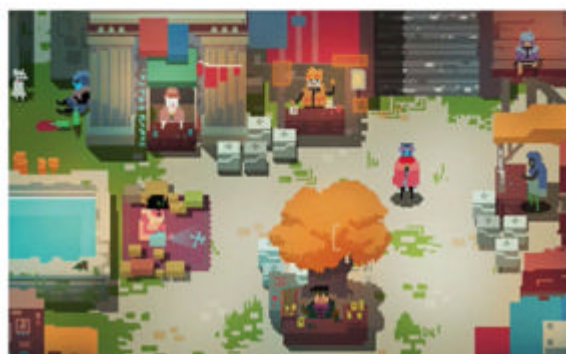
"What we look for right now above everything else is the ability to handle uncertainty with grace," says Hunicke



FROM TOP Funomena CEO **Robin Hunicke**; *Gunpoint* creator **Tom Francis**



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT  
*Dear Esther* made waves as a *Half-Life 2* mod, and subsequently evolved into a full game; Heart Machine's *Hyper Light Drifter* is being built using YoYo Games' Game Maker; Francis collaborated with an artist and composer to finish his first game, *Gunpoint*



## "A great portfolio demonstrates that you have a strong sense of your own style"

when we ask her what she looks for in new hires. "Right now, everything about Funomena is evolving. We can't make a profit until we finish our games – that's the nature of starting a new business. Until we understand and complete the design of the games we're making, they will be in a state of flux – that's the nature of game design. So the number one skill we look for is creativity in the face of all these unknowns."

But Hunnicke also points out that having a game-related degree will prove to studios that you are able to make and meet commitments. As you'll see from our survey of some of the top UK and European institutions over the coming few pages, there is an ever-

greater choice of specialised courses for those who want to build their career on a strong educational foundation. Whether a degree is right for you depends on what kind of role in the industry you want to have. Degrees tend to carry far greater weight for roles at studios at the larger end of the industry spectrum, but investing the time in an undergraduate or postgraduate programme will also help you to build an arguably even more important piece of the puzzle: your portfolio.

"A great portfolio will demonstrate that you have a strong sense of your own style and great skills for executing it – [and this is] key for many disciplines," Hunnicke continues. "But if you are fragile

in the face of uncertainty, you will be overwhelmed by working in a small, tightly knit team where every day counts for so much. In our experience, thriving in an evolving environment is more about your attitude towards change than your schooling, experience or level of skill at a given job. So, right now, we're very focused on hiring people who can handle the unique pressures of being at a company like ours."

**Richard Jolly**, the co-founder and CMO of *Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory* studio Splash Damage, is similarly focused on personality when he makes his hires. "First and foremost, as a multiplayer-focused studio, we look to hire competitive gamers," he tells us. "It's very much at the core of our DNA as a studio; even before becoming a mod team, we used to play against each other in competitive clan matches. We've also been drilling down into the sort of person that fits the Splash Damage culture after a long process of interviews with our top employees. Loyalty, self-reliance and friendliness are at the top of the list – we're not interested in hiring geniuses who aren't team players, no matter the skillset. We're after people who put the team's ▶







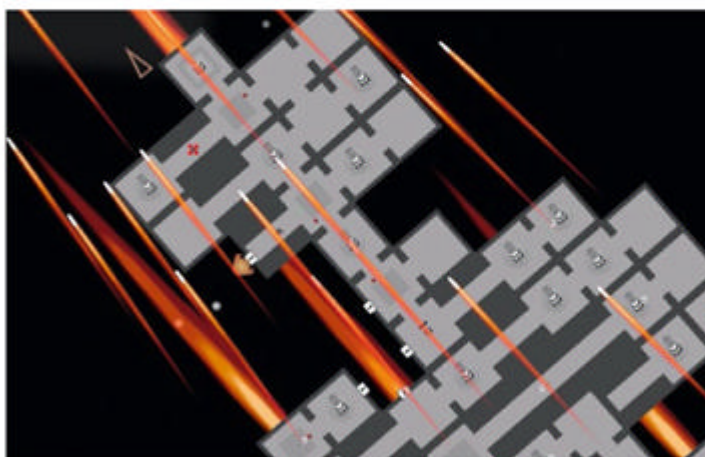
FROM TOP **Splash Damage** co-founder **Richard Jolly**; **The Foundry** product marketing manager **Shane Griffith**

interests and needs first, and who, incidentally, are great at their jobs."

As Jolly points out, *Splash Damage's* roots lie in mod making, another viable route into the game industry. Just look at the likes of *Counter-Strike*, *DayZ* and even, it's easy to forget, *Dear Esther*. "Huge successes such as *DayZ* prove that mods can lead to legitimate standalone games," Jolly says. "Our new shooter, *Dirty Bomb*, wouldn't even exist if it wasn't in the lineage of our multiplayer mod for *Quake III*. Game companies are often more interested in seeing potential hires that have real-world experience over a fancy degree. Working well in a team is super-important to us at *Splash Damage*, and mod-making is a great first step to prove [you can do this]."

**One advantage of** cutting your teeth on mod making is that you'll most likely be using the tools, or at least a version of them, created by a given studio for its game. While *ZeniMax's* purchase of *id* means the *Doom 4*-powering *id Tech 6* engine is inaccessible, older versions of the engine are now open source. And, inspired by *Unity's* sales model, *Epic Games* and *Crytek* have both released low-cost (in the case of the former, entirely free) versions of their industry-standard tools for all. This approach is also beginning to be adopted by other companies as well, who are perhaps less well known but equally important.

London-based specialist *The Foundry* made its name building powerful post-production tools for movies. *Harry Potter*, *Iron Man*, *Avatar* and *Gravity* are just a handful of the films whose visuals rely on software developed by the company, but a surprisingly large portion of the game industry uses them too. Modelling and rendering suite *Modo* and 3D painting tool *Mari* might not be as well known as *Maya*, *3DS Max* and *Zbrush*, but they're extensively used, and now *The Foundry* is making 'Indie' versions of its software available on Steam on a considerably more affordable subscription basis.



ABOVE **Francis's Heat Signature** is a game of boarding procedural spacecraft. RIGHT **Splash Damage** began by making *Quake III* mods

"We think our software is pretty powerful, and so we want new and aspiring game developers to try it out and tell us if they agree," product marketing manager **Shane Griffith** tells us. "Our tools are very well known in some of the top studios in the world, and *Mari Indie* and *Modo Indie* provide a very approachable means for everyone to experience the power of these tools."

Only a few years ago, the idea that, in the case of *Mari*, a piece of software that was originally developed by visual effects giant *WETA* would be available for a tennor a month with no commercial limitations attached would be unthinkable. But the huge swell of smaller independent creators and teams is driving prices down and the importance of accessibility up.

"This is about helping someone get into the industry and start creating really cool game assets," Griffith says. "If we put commercial limitations on the software, it would completely defeat the purpose. Of course, we need to put some limitations on the [software] to be able to offer it at the price point we have, but we committed to ensuring it had value from a business perspective as well as a creative one."

Catering for an entirely different game creation need is *Clickteam*, though it shares *The Foundry's* interest in



giving newcomers and modest operations a leg up. Along with its own games, the company also develops *Clickteam Fusion*, a 2D game creation tool along similar lines to *GameMaker*, which aims to accelerate your grasp of basic programming concepts.

"We are constantly looking for ways to help aspiring indie developers," VP of US operations **Chris Carson** tells us. "Fusion can take someone with zero programming skills and teach them the concepts of programming in no time at all – the basics of the tool can be learned within an hour."

"And one of the advantages of a tool like *Clickteam Fusion*, compared with programming languages, is that the low-level debugging is done [for you]," adds founding developer **Yves Lamoureux**. "That means no syntax errors, so you can focus on your game logic instead of losing time on boring things, which [makes creating] game prototypes much faster."



The strengths of tools such as Clickteam Fusion and GameMaker are in their self-imposed limitations and simplicity, but you'll need to carefully consider whether those limitations are right for you. Still, it's worth bearing in mind that creation software is subject to continual development, as attested to by Unity's trajectory over the past decade, seeing it grow from a simplistic 2D tool to a powerful 3D development suite used across the industry.

"We believe that when it comes to 2D game or app creation, nothing beats the versatility and speed of developing in Fusion," Carson says. "As with any programming language, Fusion has its core strengths but also areas where we need to improve. For instance, there currently isn't a good 3D development system in Fusion – if you wanted to make a 3D game, you would want to look somewhere else. But we're constantly thinking about these areas of potential improvement and how we can improve the tool in future versions."

Although he hasn't attempted to explore its boundaries, Francis points out that GameMaker isn't particularly suited



project where you want to use a lot of tech that's tough to make but already exists," he says. "And Unity's asset store lets you buy that stuff cheaply and plug it in. GameMaker has an asset store on the way, but right now you can't access anything from it unless you run the beta

With so many tools to choose from and learn, has kicking off a career in the industry become easier or harder?

"Both," says Jolly. "The massive uptake of gaming in everyday society makes for more opportunities, but also more competition. We've seen huge studios replicating the look of small indie games as a response to their popularity, and we've seen small indie studios creating games that seem triple-A through clever use of technology. As more and more games flood the market, it's going to take new and interesting ideas to stand out from the crowd."

Hunicke agrees: "When I started breaking in to games back in 1999, there were a lot fewer developers in general. The community was smaller, but it was open and interested in new people and new ideas. As we've grown, we've added people, explored new game genres, and created entirely new business models and publishing platforms. But even though it's a different experience than when I first fell head-over-heels for this industry, I think now is a fantastic time to become a game developer. The challenges are different, the opportunities are different, but they are still there, waiting for new minds, hands and hearts to make a difference. If you feel the call, join us!" ■

**The Foundry's software is behind many of the cutting-edge visuals in modern cinema, and it is now making its tools available to indie devs**

## "The massive uptake of gaming makes for more opportunities, but also competition"

for 3D either, but there are other issues to be aware of, too. "It's a bit of a pain to make your game look right on everyone's screens," he says. "Even after years of tinkering with how to configure it [with this in mind], I'm still finding my game is weirdly stretched or has interpolation artefacts on someone's display. And it's very strict about where you can save your player's data now – it has to go in that weird 'AppData' folder that no normal human has ever seen or would know how to find."

Francis has also experimented with Unity, but he found it more difficult to learn than GameMaker, recommending the latter as a better option for finishing a project without getting overwhelmed by technicalities. "Unity seems like a much better option for 3D, or any

version, a risk I've learnt to avoid."

If you already have a basic understanding of game creation, or simply have your heart set on building a 3D game, Unity is still the best, and most commonly used, low-cost tool for the job. Hunicke, whose studio is using Unity for both of its current projects, points out that the large community of developers using it means there's a sizeable resource of experience to draw upon when you hit a snag. Splash Damage also uses Unity, although it's reserved as a way of testing out ideas during a project's early concept phase before the studio exports the game to another engine. And the speed with which a game can be sketched out in software like Unity, Jolly says, makes experience of such tools invaluable.

## CUT IT OUT

Going too big too early is a common mistake, Tom Francis warns: "I think you learn loads by going through the whole process from start to finish, so the sooner you can do that, the smarter you can be about how you go about your big project. I did a game jam halfway through *Gunpoint*, and that was a real education in learning how to make massive, brutal cuts to what you have planned. On day two of that game jam, I had to cut about half the features I had planned, and I ended up doing pretty much that with *Gunpoint* on a much bigger scale. Having been through it once, I knew that cutting things you love doesn't mean that what's left will feel incomplete: your plan is usually over-complicated."





Location Dundee, UK



### GREGOR WHITE

Director of academic enterprise

[www.abertay.ac.uk](http://www.abertay.ac.uk)

Currently playing:

*Mutiny, Monstrum, Glitchspace and Seek*

### INDUSTRY ADVICE

"Make sure your skills are relevant and up to date, and get on with making great games!"

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



# Abertay University

This Dundee university treats its students like professionals

**A**bertay University's annual Dare To Be Digital competition might get most of the column inches, but the university's innovative approach to learning doesn't end there. Professor **Gregor White**, who teaches innovation and professional development at a postgraduate level in the university's School Of Arts, Media And Computer Games, explains how the spirit of its famous game competition permeates everything the school does.

### Abertay has a wide range of courses. What's on offer?

For undergraduates, there's our BA (Hons) in Computer Arts, BSc (Hons) in Computer Game Applications Development, BSc (Hons) in Computer Games Technology, BA (Hons) in Creative Sound Production, and a BA (Hons) in Games Design And Production Management. At postgraduate level, we have an MSc in Computer Games Technology, and a Professional Masters in Games Development.

### With so many avenues into game creation, why is a degree important?

The demand for a university education is something we've seen continue to increase since we launched the world's first Computer Games Technology degree in 1997. Modern game development can involve complex project management as well as exceptionally high levels of creativity, so graduates who have experience of creating multiple game projects while studying at Abertay have a real advantage. They can apply themselves to whatever career they choose, from starting their own indie studio to joining a major triple-A team.

### What makes Abertay stand out among all the other choices?

A critical part of our approach is that



At Abertay, students receive mentoring from a variety of companies, including the BBC, Disney and Sony

students make games throughout their degree and work within teams that cover all the different skills – art, audio, code, design and production – real game studios need. We've always had direct industry input into our degrees, and we develop all our courses in partnership with the game companies on our industry advisory board. Plus, the only route into Creative Skillset's game internships is through an accredited course; Abertay has the most Creative Skillset-accredited courses in the UK.

### What opportunities does Dare To Be Digital offer students?

Dare is another way that Abertay simulates what it's like to work at a game company, as well as being an incredibly enjoyable and challenging experience. All 15 teams get support from mentors including Denki, Ninja Kiwi, Ubisoft Reflections, Sega and Tag Games. This year, it's taking place from Thursday 13 to Sunday 16 August and we're expecting over 13,000 visitors. Plus, for the first time we're running it

as a globally distributed competition, so you can build your game from your own home or university anywhere in the world before coming to Dundee to show it off to thousands of people!

### You also have a PlayStation teaching lab. How was that set up?

We were delighted to open Europe's largest PlayStation teaching lab last year, giving students access to Vita and PS4 devkits as well as the PS3 devkits we already owned. PlayStation First has been a great partner and we work closely with them to let students access the same technology as Sony's studios.

### How closely does students' experience match the reality of working in games?

I'm really proud of how closely we've built our teaching areas to look and work like a real development studio. About 15 years ago, we ripped out all the walls on the ground floor to create an open-plan studio space for our teaching staff and students, just like a real game company. ■



Abertay  
University

# GET INTO GAMES!

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Abertay University created the world's first Computer Games Technology degree and is a world leader in the teaching of art, audio, design and programming for the games industry.

Abertay University taught the creator of Grand Theft Auto, and is ranked in the world's top 25 universities to study game design by the Princeton Review.

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Computer Games Development





Location London, UK



### JUSTIN PARSLER

Senior lecturer  
[www.brunel.ac.uk](http://www.brunel.ac.uk)

Currently playing:  
*Cities: Skylines*,  
*Gauntlet*, *Darkest*  
*Dungeon*, *Victoria II*,  
*The Forest*, *The Sims*  
*3* and *Sunless Sea*

### INDUSTRY ADVICE

"Get a games education or training, but make sure you get the right one for you. There are a lot of courses around, many with similar names that have radically different content. Investigate any course you might take thoroughly; find out what you will learn and find out who will be teaching it. Make sure any such course is accredited by an institution or body that can vouch for its quality, and [that it] teaches to your interests."



# Brunel University London

The West London uni emphasising creativity and design

**B**runel University London is enthusiastic about teaching game design, ensuring that its course, while taking in technical aspects, brings creativity to the fore. The team behind it has plenty of industry experience to lean on, and includes former Lionhead Studios director Steve Jackson as well as **Justin Parsler**, who is CCO at Octopus 8 Studios and consults with Mediatonic as a senior designer. Parsler made his first game in 1984, when he was just 16. Here, he details what Brunel has to offer for those interested in a strong start down a similar path.

#### What courses are available at Brunel?

We offer a BA (Hons) in Games Design, which can be taken on its own or jointly with either Film And TV or with Creative Writing. We also offer an MA in Digital Games Theory And Practice, which has a long history of helping students from a whole variety of backgrounds transition to either the industry or academia.

#### In your opinion, what is the worth of having a game-related degree?

Education and training are different. Training teaches a person how to do something, while education teaches how to learn how to do things. Properly educated people can learn how to do anything, and have a much deeper understanding of the world around them in general. At Brunel, we seek to both train and educate. There are a lot of ways to get into the game industry based on training in one form or another, and many university courses offer an education, but there are very few places that offer both.

The reality of almost every commercial sector in the whole world is that training gets you a job or allows you to work for yourself, because employers need people who can do



"We get a lot of compliments on course content, and often discuss it with industry people," Parsler says. "That's reflected in the number of students who go straight into industry"

hefty share of any profits. It needs to be made clear that when we talk about game design, we mean the creation of an experience that engages someone, has well-developed mechanics and, if appropriate, has a compelling narrative. We teach some art, but we're not an art course, and we teach some tech, but we're not a programming course. In our focus on design, we believe we're unique. This results in a course that is creatively and intellectually demanding.

## "We run a summer placement in which students go through a full product cycle"

things, while education gets you promoted, because the industry needs people who can think and learn.

#### What else makes Brunel special?

The philosophy of the university as a whole supports the approach we take in the game department: we train people how to do things as part of a rigorous education. Brunel maintains a very high standard of research while engaging with the real world and its needs. We run a summer placement with Octopus 8 Studios in which students go through a full product cycle, publish and get a

#### What kind of facilities can your students access while they face up to that challenge?

We have a dedicated lab space that is open to game students 24/7, filled with cutting-edge gaming PCs, modern and old consoles, an Oculus Rift headset and so on. Without our students, it would all just be empty rooms full of expensive electronics. Our labs are brought alive by the student community, who are always in there working, chatting or playing. That is, if they are not next door in the well-stocked boardgame room. ■

Join Brunel's thriving community of game makers and researchers

## **BA Games Design | MA Digital Games**

[www.brunel.ac.uk](http://www.brunel.ac.uk)







Location London, UK



### CHRIS CHILD

Lecturer

[www.city.ac.uk](http://www.city.ac.uk)

Currently playing:  
*International Cricket  
Captain and The  
Last Of Us*

### INDUSTRY ADVICE

"You should develop games as a hobby as well as during the degree. We can teach you the skills you need to become an outstanding programmer, but the passion and creativity has to come from you. It's a fun job and you should have fun doing it."

# City University London

This London university focuses on programming excellence

At first glance, cricket and programming don't seem to have much in common. But both require a head for numbers – something Dr **Chris Child**, who's an expert in both fields, certainly has. Child has been a lecturer in game technology since 2005, the same year he founded his own studio, Childish Things, which now develops the *International Cricket Captain* series. Prior to that, Child spent time at Empire Interactive and Microsoft's Development Lab. Here he explains his university's steadfast focus on technical skills.

#### What can students study at City?

We offer game technology courses at BSc, MSc, and MSci levels. These are technical qualifications aimed at programming roles in the game industry.

#### With so many tutorials online, why should anyone plump for a degree in programming?

Competition for jobs in the game industry is intense... A game degree is not essential to most employers, but given a choice between two candidates with similar qualifications, the game graduate will have relevant experience that will give them the edge. We've also found that game graduates are highly sought after in other parts of the computing industry, since they have excellent programming skills.

#### Why should they choose City?

Our degrees focus on programming and employability. We equip our graduates with the skills they need to compete in the game industry through both a broad education in computer science and specialised modules taught by academics with extensive and current industry experience. We understand what the industry needs because our staff are making games



City University's history runs back to 1894, when it was founded as the Northampton Institute, but it's situated near the heart of the much more recently formed Tech City

University. And we're setting up an industry advisory board with members from Rockstar, Sony and Criterion.

#### London's attractions are well known, but what other benefits does your location offer?

London is obviously a fantastic city to live and work in, and City University is particularly well placed next door to Tech City, which is the hub of game and visual effects development in London. We're also a five-minute walk from Upper Street and its vibrant nightlife.

and run game companies. And we also have an incubator team, which helps students who want to develop their final projects commercially. Applicants to the MSc program are eligible for a £2,000 bursary, and last year the quality of intake was so high that all our students qualified for this. Outstanding students – that's anybody with ABB or above in A-levels or equivalent qualifications – entering the undergraduate and MSci programmes are also eligible for a scholarship of £3,000 a year.

#### Is there any external industry influence on your courses?

The courses were initially developed with the advice of Steve Hickman, who was producer on the *FlatOut* series, myself and a team of academics at City

#### How can your students get involved with Tech City?

Our dedicated placements unit finds positions for students and has both well-established contacts with major companies and new contacts within a range of smaller startups, particularly in Tech City. The unit has been established for 30 years and has been working with the game industry for over ten.

#### Which aspect of your own facilities are you most proud of?

We have a fully equipped game technology lab, with a 3D projector and development kits. We also have an interaction lab, which has facilities focused on user experience, including research design and evaluation. ■



CITY UNIVERSITY  
LONDON

EST 1894

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City University London's **MSc in Computer Games Technology** is designed to give students strong technical skills suitable for professional programming roles in the game industry. Students develop specialist knowledge in computer graphics, AI, physics and audio, and learn how to use professional game engines as well as build their own. Close proximity to Tech City and well established ties with business and the professions allow exceptional placement and internship opportunities for students, from companies including Sony, EA, Criterion, Jagex, Playfish, Eutechynyx, Beefjack, Ideaworks and Playpen.

We offer generous scholarships for UK, EU and international students. More information is available, [city.ac.uk/mathematics-computer-science-engineering/scholarships](http://city.ac.uk/mathematics-computer-science-engineering/scholarships)

Visit our Postgraduate Open Evening, [city.ac.uk/events/2015/june/city-postgraduate-open-evening](http://city.ac.uk/events/2015/june/city-postgraduate-open-evening)



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[www.city.ac.uk/subjects/computing](http://www.city.ac.uk/subjects/computing)





Location Beaconsfield, UK



## JON WEINBREN

Head of games  
[www.nfts-games.com](http://www.nfts-games.com)  
Currently playing:  
*Life Is Strange*,  
*Never Alone* and  
*This War Of Mine*

## INDUSTRY ADVICE

"Videogames are a set of dialogues: between game and player; between the technical and the creative; between the arts and the sciences. They are still relatively new as a medium of creative expression, so if you want to make the most of the opportunity they offer, you must be prepared to facilitate those dialogues, which means you need to bridge the arts-science divide and to be as lucidly creative as you are technically adroit."



# National Film And Television School

A course for games innovators at a world-renowned film school

The National Film And Television School's game design MA only accepted its first applicants in 2012, but has rapidly established itself as an influential course. Heading it up is **Jon Weinbren**, who has spent over two decades in the creative industries, including roles at EA, Sony, the BBC and London's Science Museum.

## You focus on a single course at NFTS. What's involved?

We offer a two-year MA programme in Games Design And Development. This runs alongside a range of postgraduate MA and diploma courses across a broad spectrum of film and television specialist disciplines. At the NFTS, there is usually a maximum of eight students per MA specialism, and the Games course operates in the same way. We've now been through two full cycles and we have graduates from



The National Film And Television School was established in 1972, and is housed in working film studios

and empowering. However, having access to tools and knowing how to use them to make engaging experiences for

experience to the course and to the ideas they develop while on the course. So what we offer here is access to a diversity of ideas and experiences as well as a very sound creative and technical education, which we feel is a great route to becoming an innovator and a future leader in the field.

## "It's my view that studying games at this level offers real value and focus"

both already out there in the world and making waves. We've forged great relationships with the other specialisms – particularly screenwriters, producers, sound designers and composers.

## With more paths open to aspiring developers than ever, why should they consider a game-related degree?

It's true that making games and distributing them has become a much more accessible endeavour than in years gone by. There are so many good game development tools that are free or nearly free to use, and that's exciting

increasingly diverse audiences are two different things. The best route into game development really depends on what your ambitions are. It's possible to acquire relevant skills and techniques independently, but what you miss out on is the teamwork, the ideas, the inspiration and the access to fellow collaborators. Although we are one of only a handful of MA offerings in games, it's my view that studying games at this level offers real value and focus. Many of our students also come to us with a few years' experience in the working world, and they can bring that

## How is NFTS positioned to do that?

The unique thing about the NFTS is how students from each discipline work with each other on set modules and on final projects, and the Games course is no exception. Over the two years, students are equipped with a comprehensive grounding in game art, animation, design, production and coding, and encouraged to explore and experiment at every stage. At its heart, it is an uncompromisingly creative course, yet we make sure students have a thorough and practical technical understanding of all aspects of game development. ■

## Develop Industry Excellence Awards Nominee 2014

**Our recent graduates are already launching successful careers in the games industry.**

Since they first appeared on the scene last year, several of our graduates have secured funding for their own projects, and others have already taken up great jobs for great studios.

**Our students develop an extended network of industry contacts.**

We exhibit at major events and conferences throughout the year, and our students enjoy the benefit of direct involvement with a wide selection of industry luminaries and innovative games practitioners.

Image courtesy of Pixel Ripped, an NFTS Game designed and developed by Ana Ribeiro for PC and Virtual Reality hardware.

# NFTS

NATIONAL  
FILM AND  
TELEVISION  
SCHOOL

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Location Falmouth, UK



### RICH BARHAM

Senior lecturer  
[www.falmouth.ac.uk](http://www.falmouth.ac.uk)

Currently playing:  
*FIFA 15*, *Middle-earth: Shadow Of Mordor*, *World Of Warcraft*, *War Thunder* and *Game Of Thrones*

### INDUSTRY ADVICE

"Learn how to work with others. If you can't, then you will experience massive difficulties unless you want to make games solo. That means being able to mediate, be diplomatic and compromise as well as swallowing that all-too-present pride that we can sometimes suffer from!"



# Falmouth University

A south coast university that prides itself on its supportive environment

Having served as a director at Zenimax Online, Riot Studios and Io-Interactive, senior lecturer in Digital Games **Rich Barham's** CV features a dazzling list of credits that includes *World Of Warcraft*, *League Of Legends*, *The Elder Scrolls Online* and *Hitman*. He continues to be active in the industry he teaches about, too: he's currently the CEO of Octopus 8 Studios, Io's operations director, and a board member for Antimatter Games.

#### What kind of courses do you offer?

Our courses offer a broader game education where there is time to consider development and the conceptual and cultural issues around games alongside hands-on experience of working in a development studio context. We also teach business skills and our courses are designed so students are equipped with the skills to set up their own indie companies. With our degrees in BA (Hons) Digital Games and BSc (Hons) Computing for Games, we're offering a great foundation whichever route into the industry you wish to follow.

#### In practical terms, what advantage does that foundation give students?

As someone who has seen a great many applications from those without a game education attempt to enter the industry, there's a lack of consistent understanding of how to not make your game in a vacuum and practical team learning that's missing with those who haven't been fortunate enough to undertake a game course. With places in the industry being as competitive as they are, this type of knowledge is of paramount importance.

#### What makes Falmouth University special in this respect?

Falmouth is a heavily creative area. It



Rex Crowle, best known for working on *LittleBigPlanet* and *Tearaway*, is a notable Falmouth alumnus

attracts many creatives with a variety of interests and has a long history rooted in both the university and the local, supportive culture. This is a huge advantage. Our students are taught by people with a great deal of industry experience, and who are currently conducting research into games and game technology. Our tutors can give the time to provide a well-structured learning experience that helps students to make the transition to studio working practices. And that's all in the context of a very friendly, arts-based campus in the most spectacular landscape!

#### What about facilities?

We have dedicated, industry-standard game development studios, and industry-standard animation, audio and music facilities are also available to students. The university has invested a great deal of money to support game education and research, and as the course grows in strength, so will the scope of our facilities. We have access to a sandpit space that's perfect for

brainstorming meetings, and a well-equipped life room for artists, as well as many breakout spaces that are scattered around the university and in The Exchange. On a lovely spring day, students can hold their stand-up meetings in the blossoming orchard or in the formal gardens of the 18th-century house around which the university has been built.

#### And how about links between Falmouth and the industry?

My own background is primarily with successful triple-A studios, and Nick Dixon has a long and storied career. Our course was set up with direct industry involvement, including Supermassive Games' Steve Goss, and with the support of Antimatter Games, a local studio in Cornwall. Collectively, we have the experience of having been a part of some of the biggest studios as well as smaller but no less successful outfits, and our ability to help students develop anywhere in that spectrum is strong as a result. ■



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**Find Out more**

[falmouth.ac.uk/games-academy](http://falmouth.ac.uk/games-academy)  
[falmouth.ac.uk/still-time-to-apply](http://falmouth.ac.uk/still-time-to-apply)

**Courses**

**BA(Hons) Digital Games**

Are games your passion? Falmouth's Digital Games degree builds the skills you need to turn that passion into a profession, whether you want to be a programmer, designer, artist, animator, writer or sound designer. We'll work with you to help decide which route matches your interests and then put those skills into practice to make completed, publishable games.

**BSc(Hons) Computing for Games**

"This course is designed to appeal to those who are interested in learning how to engage creatively with the computing systems that are used in the creation of digital games. A firm foundation in computational forms provides the skills and knowledge required to bring technological innovation to the industry, alongside experience in the realities of game development."

– **Tony Gillham**, Director, Antimatter Games Ltd.

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**FALMOUTH**  
UNIVERSITY





Location Breda, Netherlands



## MATA HAGGIS

Professor of  
creative and  
entertainment  
games

[www.nhtv.nl](http://www.nhtv.nl)

Currently playing:

*Destiny, Valiant  
Hearts, Monument  
Valley, Picross, and  
The Room 1 and 2*

## INDUSTRY ADVICE

"Finish your small projects and share them – you are the only person stopping yourself from releasing games. The more games that you share, the faster you are going to learn what works and what doesn't, and this is a key part of our craft. If you get to the interview stage, demonstrating your skills with something small and well-crafted will make you stand out."

# NHTV

Run by developers, a Dutch game school with close industry links

**D**r Mata Haggis joined NHTV as a senior lecturer in 2010, and has 15 years' experience in the digital entertainment industry – seven of which were spent running his own game company. At the moment, he's collaborating with the NHTV alumni-founded SassyBot Studio on a narrative-focused project called *Fragments Of Him*. In his new role as professor of creative and entertainment games, Haggis will continue his own research and to strengthen NHTV's reputation. Here, he tells us how the school's focus on the industry keeps it relevant.

### Tell us about your courses.

International Games Architecture And Design (IGAD) is a four-year Bachelor Of Science course designed to bring beginner game developers up to a young professional standard or above, with the opportunity to work on great portfolio pieces and live projects in professional development studios. Students choose to begin with a focus on 3D visual art, programming, or design and production, and in later years they can mix these areas for a broad skillset. They might choose to add



Breda has a burgeoning indie scene, which is celebrated by the Indie Pendant Festival every other month

### How should prospective students decide between the two?

Where the Bachelor course gives you the 'how' of game development, the Master helps you find the deeper 'why' behind industry processes. By learning about these core structures of game tech, you become adept in advanced industry-relevant skills, which makes you

In addition, with the right education, you can build industry networks far faster than a junior development job will typically allow. On a more abstract level, our focus is on creating amazing, intelligent game developers and supporting their dream projects. Our only goal is the growth of students in both their technical knowledge and soft skills, such as teamwork and leadership, and we don't have publisher deadlines to interfere with this.

### What makes NHTV stand apart?

Both students wishing to join a triple-A studio and those who have a goal of starting their own business benefit from our courses' unusually high level of industry focus. This difference from other academies is most noticeable in our staff: 100 per cent of the lecturers come from a development background across a wide variety of genres, platforms, and business models, and so have hands-on knowledge to share with students, as well as professional networks to use to get industry feedback. ■

## "100 per cent of the lecturers come from a development background"

game audio, or to narrow down to a single, specialist development role. The Master Of Game Technology (MGT) is a one-year Master that builds on the practical skills of a Bachelor student, but takes these to higher level with increased flexibility in their project work, and a variety of structured lectures... You can define your own project from the beginning, then refine and research it with the support of our staff and feedback from visiting professionals.

a desirable employee capable of advancing to senior development duties.

### What value do you think a game education has in today's industry?

In the most basic sense, the industry has become incredibly competitive. More and more people are joining, so the entry-level skills bar has been raised. A good education allows you the time to create a great portfolio and to walk into a studio with the skills they need.

# MASTERS IN GAME TECHNOLOGY

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**ANDREW  
RICHARDSON  
& CHRIS  
KNOWLES**  
Programme  
leaders  
[www.sunderland.ac.uk](http://www.sunderland.ac.uk)

Currently playing:  
**AR** *Two Dots* and  
*Crossy Road*.  
**CK** *GTA V*, *Dragon  
Age: Inquisition*  
and *The Lord Of  
The Rings Online*

## INDUSTRY ADVICE

**AR** "Make stuff. Start making games, be creative, and learn how to use tools like Unity and GameMaker."  
**CK** "Be prepared to work with others and to network. Making links is so important in this industry."

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# University Of Sunderland

This award-winning institution covers every aspect of the industry

**A**ndrew Richardson and Chris Knowles are programme leaders for, respectively, BA (Hons) Game and App Design and BSc (Hons) Games Software Development. Both have varied CVs, Richardson having created and exhibited interactive artwork internationally, while Knowles is an experienced software developer. Here, they explain the broad reach of Sunderland's offering.

## What courses can be studied at Sunderland University?

**Andrew Richardson** We offer a wide suite of programmes that covers all aspects of game design, from concept artwork and creative ideas right through to programming and software development. For example, BA (Hons) Game and App Design focuses on creative indie development; BSc (Hons) Game Software Development is about game software design, development and programming; and BA (Hons) Animation and Games Art looks at concept artwork, plus 2D and 3D character design.

## For you, what is the value in seeking out a game education?

**AR** You can learn a lot from online tutorials, but for me, it's the shared experience of learning from others that's important, as well as the opportunity to develop creative ideas and open up to new ways of thinking and working.  
**Chris Knowles** Being in a formal environment instils the discipline to produce good quality, effective products in a timely fashion, which you wouldn't get at home. University provides the time for students to develop, gain and share expertise and improve their communication skills so that they can pitch their products to clients. Making games can be a challenging but rewarding career, and we want to



The University Of Sunderland has invested £130 million in the facilities at its two seaside campuses

ensure our students are ready for that. An educational environment provides a chance to experiment and to make mistakes that aren't costly.

## What sets your offering apart?

**CK** We have a student-centred focus, and provide excellent individual support and guidance. We have committed staff who have a wealth of industry experience and who bring a real enthusiasm for their work. Our Games Software Development course has recently been revalidated in line with the new Creative Skillset requirements to ensure that our course is relevant and prepares students for industry.

**AR** And our Game And App course has a focus on indie startups and is very enterprise focused. Students have recently voted Sunderland the top University in the North East in the annual WhatUni Student Choice Awards.

## What kind of facilities do you offer?

**AR** We have two campuses, which are perfectly placed to ensure a life-changing student experience, and a suite of Cintiq [graphics tablets] in the design centre. We use industry-standard

software, including Unity and Maya, and our Game Hub ensures that each student gets their own workspace.

**CK** We also have game laboratories and are part of the PlayStation First Academic Development Programme, and the university is a member of the PS4 development kits and supporting software programme, too. That grants us the licence to Sony game console devkit hardware and software. We also use 3D Studio Max, Photoshop, Unreal Engine 4 and Visual Studio 13.

## What industry ties have you built?

**CK** We've developed partnerships with a number of major companies, including Microsoft, Sony, Cisco and BlackBerry. These partnerships allow students to experiment with cutting-edge and current applications, and many partners provide hardware and software for our courses, including Sony, as I said, but also Microsoft console technologies, and BlackBerry smartphones and tablets.

**AR** We're also a leading partner in the Sunderland Software City initiative, which aims to develop the software industry in our city and region. ■

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Location Bournemouth, UK



**CHRISTOS GATZIDIS**  
Principal  
academic  
[www.bournemouth.ac.uk](http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk)  
Currently playing:  
CSR Racing

## INDUSTRY ADVICE

"Dedication, personal initiative and passion are paramount to breaking into the industry. You need to be spending time outside of the course refining your portfolio, but also networking with key people. You are, after all, competing with not just the students on the same course, but also nationally and internationally."



# Bournemouth University

A seaside centre of research, education and professional practice

**D**r Christos Gatzidis is a principal academic in Creative Technology at Bournemouth University's Faculty Of Science And Technology. He has also contributed to a number of journals and books, including the UDK iOS Game Development Beginner's Guide. Here, he takes the time to lay out Bournemouth University's mission.

### What courses are you offering?

At the Faculty Of Science And Technology and within the Creative Technology Department, we offer two degrees at an undergraduate level: a BSc in Games Technology and a BSc in Games Programming. The first is more generalist, covering all parts of the development pipeline, whereas the second one is geared towards the programming aspects of development. On a postgraduate level, we offer an MSc in Computer Games Technology.

### With so many paths to the industry, what's the value of a game education?

Today, it is true that putting together a



"Many students enjoy the by-the-seaside lifestyle so much that they don't want to leave," Gatzidis says

learner, the attention to deadlines and professionalism, the facilitation of organised teamwork, and many others.

### What makes Bournemouth stand out?

Bournemouth University has traditionally had a very strong reputation in many of

a grander scale there is significant building work taking place here at the Talbot campus: two new state-of-the-art academic buildings are being prepared over the next few years.

### You offer a 40-week placement. Who have your students worked with?

It's sandwiched between the second and final year, and so far, student placements have included Jagex, Lionhead and many others.

### How about during term time?

We have a number of guest talks from industry speakers on a variety of topics every year. Among others, Rare, Unity and Bohemia Interactive Simulations have all visited us this academic year. We also have an annual industrial advisory panel, which provides direct guidance on our course structure and curriculum. We're accredited by TIGA, and academics on the course, such as myself, are involved in EPSRC-funded R&D projects with companies such as SCEE R&D and Ninja Theory via our Centre Of Digital Entertainment. ■

## "Student placements have included Jagex, Lionhead and many others"

strong portfolio that could potentially lead to employment in the game industry can be carried out by many non-academic activities, such as game jam participation and others. We do involve our students with activities such as those; for example, we're running a game jam at the end of this academic year with the sponsorship of Creative England and the GamesLab programme. Still, it's important not to disregard the impact that dedicated academic education can offer to an individual, such as the structured approach to becoming an independent

the creative industries; currently, the university is focused on fusing together education, professional practice and research, and making that part of an improved student experience.

### What kind of facilities are set up for the courses you run?

At the moment, we have three dedicated PC game development labs and a store where students can borrow a wide variety of equipment, such as Oculus Rifts and iOS/Android tablets, for free. We are constantly striving to update and expand all of this, and on

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JAMES LEACH

# Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

Remember when you learned a trade and had a job for life? Of course you don't. It was years ago. As a society, we're all supposed to be fluid, dynamic and upwardly versatile nowadays. Which is another way of saying that whatever we do, we'll probably be made redundant in a bit, so keep a sturdy cardboard box handy and don't scatter too many personal effects around your desk.

The videogame industry has always been one where rapid changes of circumstance and personnel are the norm. If someone has maintained employment for more than six years in one place, other developers will queue to see them at lunchtime like people at the zoo. And because entertainment software development is a young person's game, only once in my life have I attended a retirement party, and even then the guy was 49.

The worst of it is the studio closures. The regrets, the locked meeting rooms, the scramble for unclaimed plastic anime figures and the sad, inevitable theft of the three unbroken Aeron chairs. And later, there's the final pub do. You can always spot these by the ranks of parked hatchbacks clearly handed down by parents, each with a backseat now covered in old joysticks and metres of Ethernet cabling. Inside the pub, the atmosphere is one of strained excitement, though. Some people are talking about startups. Others will go back to college. One of the artists is definitely going to do a gritty online reboot of Watchmen. That coder who was obsessed about having gorillas in every game is finally going to realise his dream and apply for a job at the Monkey World Ape Rescue Centre in Dorset.

As is so often the case, those speaking the most about their plans have the stupidest ideas. Two guys believe that by selling a musical note at a time via PayPal, they can get the world to write a symphony. Someone else is currently, actively and loudly researching the notion of a Kickstarter project that turns common alcoholic beverages into urine.

Finding out where people you once worked with end up is an interesting diversion.



If someone has maintained employment for more than six years, other devs will queue to see them like people at the zoo

I recently conducted exhaustive research using Facebook. America and Canada swallow up a large number of ex-colleagues, all of whom seem to land highly lucrative executive roles. It's a long Clipping Plane tradition to compare the game industry to the film world, and it's relevant now. Many British actors often seem to be automatically promoted to the big time once they cross the Pond, and it's weird to find out the guy who never said a word during his four years in the corner of a studio in Surrey is now a motivational speaker in the world of online gaming in San Francisco. Another guy who reinvented graphical smoothing is driving

a Ferrari in Saskatchewan, a Ferrari paid for by telling other people how damn hard reinventing graphical smoothing was.

However, further careful analysis reveals the number of ex-UK games people going to North America isn't all that big; it just seems that way because they go on about it. Posting pictures of a Woking car park isn't quite as impressive as a bunch of selfies taken from the seat of an SUV on a sun-drenched eight-lane beltway as they drive into a city the rest of us know from some films starring Cameron Diaz.

Of course, talented people get snapped up rapidly, but when any fairly sizeable game company explodes, it's impressive how many fragments coalesce to form new and often far better startups making highly creative mobile apps, quirky little games, funky interactive sites and even business software. And for the dedicated freelancer, it's nice to be able to pick up decent work from old colleagues. No pitching, no prospective proposals, no, "Could you just work on this for a while free of charge and if we like it we'll hire you? Otherwise we'll just nick the best bits and give them to the next writer." It can be quite a relief, that.

And finally, there's the one guy. He ends up writing TV shows, despite being known purely for coding DLL libraries. Or you hear his unmistakable tones on Radio 2, where he now has his own show. You can't help wondering what would have happened if he'd just stayed with the DLLs. Frankly, most of them weren't very good anyway. So how did he get to be the next Commissioner Of Police?

Above it all, there's the guy who nobody likes. The final bash is the time to tell him this, and to tell him how unpleasant he truly is. It doesn't matter now. All the resentment can spill out. It's fine for this to be the case, but you'd better hope he's three sheets to the wind and forgets, because you can be sure of one thing: with an attitude like his, he's going to be the one we all end up working for three years down the line.

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio



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July 2

